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COMMON FACTORS THAT AFRICAN AMERICAN ADULTS ATTRIBUTE
TO THEIR GRADUATION FROM A PREDOMINANTLY AFRICAN
AMERICAN MIDWESTERN SCHOOL DISTRICT: A CASE STUDY

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EDUCATION POLICY

At the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

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APPROVAL PAGE

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my cheerleaders who encouraged me to pursue this degree and cheered me on along the way. While they are celebrating my success with the Angels on High, I hear their cheers in my heart.

TO: Aunt Sister, Rob, Deb and Dee Dee

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Heavenly Father because I *can* do all things through Him, who strengthens me. I thank him for blessing me with wonderful parents Joann and John Hatten and my wonderful 11 year old son, Jovan who provided the most encouragement and support to me throughout the pursuit of my Doctorate. These 3 people gave up their time and re-organized their daily priorities to ensure my success. I would also like to thank my “Chair Emeritus”- Dr. Dwayne Wright, who led me through the initial phases of this work and made sure my self confidence never waiver. I would also like to give a special thanks to the Chair of my Doctoral Committee, Dr. Anne Galletta who provided emotional support, technical support and shared a passion for my study. It was truly refreshing to have someone who believed in my work. I truly appreciate the support of Dr. James Carl and Dr. Mittie Davis Jones who have provided tremendous moral support and shown great tenacity in sticking with me over the long haul. I also appreciate the thoughtful insight provided for this work from Dr. Brian Harper and Dr. Justin Perry, the other committee members who saw this work to completion. Finally, I would also like to thank all of my family members and friends who yielded to my calls through the ‘last hour’ and poured out their prayers, ideas and resources to make this project a success.

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study examines the reflections of African American adults on their high school journey to graduation in the late 20th Century from one Midwestern public school district where African- American students represented the majority of the student body. The particular emphasis of this study was to identify common factors that the participants perceive as critical to their own high school graduation, as the measure of academic success and lifelong learning. This dissertation addresses two research questions through the methodology of narrative inquiry: 1) what are the experiences of the African American adults who were educated in the same predominately African American Midwestern public school district, over a 20-year period? And 2) what factors do African American adults who successfully graduated from high school perceive as critical to their academic success and lifelong learning? The findings suggest that for these participants, full community support, and expectations set by adults in the community and school supported their success. Positive caring adults, solid peer relationships, and engaged school staff were also identified as critical to their high school graduation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The inability of American educators and policy makers to reduce disparities in education and increase the likelihood of achieving positive education outcomes for African Americans of all ages in the current education structures is due in part to the fact that African American student success is rarely present in the literature (Williams, 2004). Instead, the absence of success for African American students is often the topic of study in the education field. The implied results of this absence are often referenced in the literature when delinquency, deviant behaviors or otherwise negative behaviors or attitudes are examined in other disciplines such as sociology, criminology, or political science (Wiggan, 2007).

Education policy and philosophy sometimes appears to “blame the victim” and perpetuate stereotypes to excuse inefficiencies in the current system. According to Carter G. Woodson (1933), “It is merely a matter of common sense in approaching people through their environment in order to deal with conditions as they are rather than as you would like to see them or imagine that they are (p. XVIII).” The inability of the American adult and K-12

education system to respond to the needs of both of these groups, many of which are very similar, is very much linked to the inability to create effective solutions to the current achievement dilemma that exists for African American students. The solution must be found in understanding their perspectives and on reality, not institutionalized presumptions.

Historical Perspectives

Rudolph A. Cain (1995) attributes the absence of the work of Alain Leroy Locke and his profound impact on the advancement of the field of African American continuing professional education to “a significant void in the literature” (p. 88). He believes that Locke’s “significant, long-term involvement and leadership in the adult education movement” (p. 88) was critical because Locke insisted on greater inclusion of African Americans in Continuing Professional Education as instructors, and as participants, in the early 1900’s. As an evaluator of African American adult learning programs, Locke was convinced of the “value of culture based programs in enhancing program success” (p. 92). Cain notes that the “the nation’s refusal, resistance or inability to tackle serious educational problems during the early part of this century have now come back to haunt us as we move into the 21st century” (p. 97). Institutionalized racism also limits the number of African Americans involved in research in American universities that could help to decrease this void in the literature (Sheared, 1999).

Academic achievement as a reality for African Americans of all ages is often approached from a deficit model in terms of language and research

methodology. This view of African American students from a deficit model, or the focus on oppositional behavior (Ogbu, 1987, 1998, 2003, 2004), inhibits the development of effective teaching strategies, the quantity of research that contributes positive insight in to how to help African Americans achieve (Cain, 1995; Ladsen-Billings, 1996; Wiggan, 2007), and effective discourse about how to improve academic achievement for these groups through the infusing of culturally relevant curriculum in to the learning opportunities for these groups (Sheared 1999; Teal, 2006). This study identified factors that African Americans believed were critical to their successful high school graduation, and contributes to the void in the literature toward improving education offered to African Americans at all levels of participation, whether elementary, college, continuing professional education and in other lifelong learning opportunities.

A focused literature review on the specific needs of African American adult participants in Continuing Professional Education Programs or other learning programs suggests that African American adults and children face some of the same challenges in the perception of their academic success. The focus of most research on African American adult success in education appears to have been considered using a mainstream American approach that does not emphasize the value of cultural experiences in learning. The result is the failure of the adult learning system to effectively meet their needs or improve the quality of services offered (Rogers & Hansman, 2004).

Research on African Americans or members of other racial minorities in the United States has been restricted because of the same phenomena that

plague research around the education of African American children.

Talmadge C. Guy (1999) suggests that the concept of Culturally Relevant Adult Education has not been infused into the current system of education because of the pattern of continuing social inequality that is perpetuated in the adult education system in this country. Elizabeth A. Peterson (1999) suggests that education is a political process and a social activity because it has “always been rooted in the antiracist struggle” (p. 79). Her article suggests that an overlooked but primary purpose of Continuing Professional Education for African American adults and adult educators needs to be about “a focus on the antiracist struggle with new strategies for surviving in a racist society” (p. 79). The 21st Century clearly represents an opportune time and space where new strategies and solutions can be addressed

Research Context

This study identifies factors that led to each participant’s successful graduation from high school based on their perceptions as evident in their own personal adult narratives. The findings from this study contribute a valuable missing piece to school reform efforts---qualitative input from African Americans who achieved academic success as defined as high school graduation from an American public high school and the impact of this experience on other lifelong learning pursuits. As we recall, the goal of the current presidential administration does not stop at high school graduation. American educators and policy makers must identify solutions to increase

African American participation in post secondary opportunities if the nation is to continue to be a world leader.

As high school dropout rates and education attainment rates as measured by the number of degrees conferred continue to fall behind other groups in the country, the perceptions of these adults may shed light on the value of the integration of cultural practices in to K-12 learning where the desired outcome is graduation from high school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2009 Tables and Figures) there is still room for improvement in overall academic achievement and increased degrees conferred for African Americans. Statistics report some improvement in the number of Bachelor's Degree completion of African Americans age 25 and over since 1960. The data shows the number of degrees deferred over time to be: 1960 - 3.5%, 1970 - 6.1%, 1980 - 7.9%, 1990 - 11.3%, 2000 - 16.6%, and 2010 - 20% (Table 8).

In addition to these statistics the Center also notes that in 1980 19.1% of African- American students between the ages of 16-24 dropped out of high school. That number decreased to 13.2% in 1990, 13.1% in 2000, and dropped to 9.9% in 2008. The NCES also notes that the "Black-White gap narrowed during the 1980's with no measurable change between 1990 and 2008" (The Condition of Education Report, 2010).

The implications of this research contributes data gleaned from actual life experiences to the limited body of existing qualitative research gained from

African Americans who succeeded in high school and continue on as lifelong learners. This data can assist in the national effort to develop and implement strategies that will bring success for students of color back into public schools, particularly urban public schools. Most importantly, results from this study are also useful in the discourse about how to increase the participation of African Americans in post-secondary, continuing professional development, and other forms of adult education, an effort that begins much earlier in the life of the individual. This topic reflects this author's secondary research interest.

Research clearly suggests that socialization is a factor in learning and for African--American students, communalism is the predominate form of socialization (Sankofa et al., 2005; Tyler et al., 2005). A contributing factor to the perceived underachievement of African American students in K-12 and post-secondary education may be the lack of integration of their communalistic culture and beliefs within the current mainstream individualistic approach that most often provide the basis for teaching and learning in compulsory education and higher education in the U.S. Joel Spring (1997) notes that "in the twentieth century, the culture wars are characterized by Americanization programs, civil rights movements demanding representation of minority culture in public schools and the multicultural debate" (p.3). Thus the pursuit of an understanding of the role of culture in academic success that is posited in this study also places this study in a larger context, one aimed at understanding "the creation and distribution of particular knowledge to a society." (p. 3).

While statistics such as those reflected from NCES earlier in this section that African Americans are not receiving high percentages of Bachelor's and Associates Degrees as compared to their total population and are continuing to experience challenging drop out rates, there is limited qualitative research to understand why or how to increase participation and ultimately success. The author of this case study would suggest that this research on the level of success that the participants have achieved has undoubtedly been impacted by their experiences in K-12 education, which supports the notion that research gathered from this study must also inform policy decisions and practice enhancements for post-secondary and other adult education venues.

Statement of the Problem

While the viewpoints and experiences of African American people are readily available, they are rarely incorporated into discussions of how to improve the education that African-- American students receive in American public education and continuing professional education today. The absence of valuable African American input also contributes to the lack of effective adult education available that successfully meets the needs of African-American students and students from other cultures. The lack of responsive programming for children results in the lack of participation of members of these groups in continuing professional education, GED courses, and post-high school education opportunities.

It is the belief of this researcher that eliciting stories from African American adults who successfully graduated from a Midwestern suburban

high school in a district where for over 30 years, the overwhelming majority of the students were African American, will guide policy and practice decisions about how best to promote and support African American student success. The fact that this specific community experienced re-segregation, declining population, and increased poverty over this time frame suggests that the experiences of students from this community sheds light on some of the challenges faced by African Americans in urban schools today (Keating, 1994).

Purpose of the Study

Learning is a lifetime experience and all adults need to participate in formal and informal learning experiences throughout their lives in order to benefit themselves and society. The experience of learning in K-12 propels or can discourage individuals from voluntarily continuing to participate in learning experiences throughout their lives based on whether or not they developed a positive sense of self as a learner as children. K-12 education programs must become effective at educating the whole child and preparing them to be successful contributors in the 21st century. Adult learning programs must know how to build upon whatever the K-12 learning experience was put in place in order to help move African American adults forward, specifically through helping these adults regain confidence in their ability to succeed as lifelong learners (Sheared, 1999).

In the broadest definition of education, it is the belief of this author that the challenges African American learners face in the current system of education spans the pipeline from cradle to and through career experiences. Thus, pre-K, K-12, post-secondary education including continuing professional education and lifelong learning settings are included in the search for critical factors that impact African American student success in this study. This study addressed education in the broadest sense with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the African American-learner and success in academic settings.

At the conclusion of the K-12 experience, if Continuing Professional Education programs are a viable anticipated choice for African American adults to have the desired impact on society, helping to advance theories and improve practices and technologies, all members of society must find their place within the discipline of education. Barriers to African American participation in the discourse and the opportunities for them to advance their contribution of their culture to the greater good, as well as their individual contribution to the field, their chosen profession, or their personal knowledge base must be identified and eliminated. Most importantly, their experiences in their profession and adult learning programs must resonate within their spirits and “gel” into their minds as possibilities in order for them to obtain the full benefit of the programs and help to improve the situation for others, either as policymakers for educators. When adult learning programs do not provide the space for the necessary discourse and challenging of the dominant culture to

occur in the quest for solutions, or learning, the programs fail to serve members of the African American professional community and society in an appropriate manner. This unfortunate scenario appears to hold true across the entire education pipeline.

A question asked by the author of this case study is why has a role for culturally relevant curriculum in adult education *not* become fundamental in the field of adult education or in K-12 education? The requirement to develop effective education programs for African Americans will continue to go unrealized unless deliberate actions are taken to understand the needs of the African American in education. Again this is an area that has been ignored by policy makers and educators. Education that advances the values and struggles of African American people will emerge from a clear understanding of the issues that impede effective programming for African American Adults, including an emphasis on their childhood learning experiences.

There are traditional patterns of oversight that exist in discourse about high-quality pedagogical strategies for African American children that are inherent in the presumptions that are made about the needs of the African Americans. Perhaps the solution lies in the ability of curriculum specialists and administrators to re-engineer learning programs to achieve the desired participant-centered outcomes specifically in a group where African American learners are present. It is evident that this transformation will not occur without increased awareness of culturally relevant instruction and implementation of more aggressive strategies on the part of policymakers, educators business

and industry leaders. Once the appropriate understanding exists, programs will truly validate and support the African American adult learner in advancing their own needs.

There is a limited body of research which attempts to elicit the opinions of African American students in the discussion of school reform (Howard, 2001). During my Doctoral Studies in an education program where the primary focus was education in an urban setting, the issue of school reform was addressed from several different perspectives. The commonality in these multi-disciplinary approaches included their emphasis on the development of a determination of who should improve --the teachers, the parents or the students--in order to help African American students get the full benefit of participation in the American education system. Theoretical perspectives on the relevance of culturally competent instruction and the integration of cultural themes into the education of all children contribute in particular to the theoretical framework for this study (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings 1995).

In addition, the work of Sankofa, Hurley, Allen, and Boykin (2005) and Tyler, Boykin, and Dillihunt (2005) contribute to the framework as well in terms of their support of the role of the African American cultural theme of communalism to African American student learning. Where academic success is the goal, the opportunity for students to maintain their cultural values must be available. Equally important, the belief that the values of the culture are indeed valid and aligned with the achievement of positive outcomes from the experience of learning must exist. Critical race theory provides a perspective

that attends to relations of power by race in education and validates the critical role of culturally competent instruction and the integration of cultural themes into the education of all children (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings 1995).

Racism in the learner environment is a deterrent for African Americans to participate fully in the process of education in America. The application of a Critical Theory perspective to the field of adult education critiques and raises questions about the manner in which we teach and the subject matter (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 241). The creation of discourse and action planning that could result from a logically-structured approach to a focus on power, oppression knowledge, and truth would open the door for African Americans to benefit from the best that education has to offer. Research on the impact of culturally relevant instruction on African American student success is supportive of the assertion that African American socialization within a school context is amenable to academic success. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2005) defines culturally relevant teaching as pedagogy as committed to collective empowerment, not just individual (p. 160). She also notes that culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a "vehicle" for learning.

Without the voice of the African American in K-12 policy making and best practice development, culturally relevant education will not become a reality, although the research suggests that it will help increase academic success for African American students of all ages. For example, Elizabeth Peterson (1999) suggests that the field of continuing professional education can

improve the quality of services and learner outcomes that are achieved by African American adults by “creating a richer dialogue regarding culturally relevant adult education” (p.84). She further suggests that the incorporation of Derrick Bell’s critical race theory into the dialogue about quality education for African Americans will move the discussion forward to a commendable future. She believes that critical race theory will expand the dialogue “and design creative new programs that meet the needs of African Americans at numerous stages of growth and development” (p. 83). An acceptance of the value of critical race theory is the acceptance that mainstream society must move beyond acting (and designing programs) as if all African Americans are the same, thereby negating our individual experiences. Her research provides a clear explanation of critical race theory that provides the underlying theoretical framework for this study.

In order to meet the academic achievement goals set by the head of this nation and to assure academic success for African American people, culturally relevant curriculum must be available and delivered by socially conscious and aware instructors, according to Vanessa Sheared (1999). She suggests that only adult educators who understand how their personal philosophies and experiences affect African American learners (and other program participants) in their practice can deliver effective education programs for African American adults. The author of this case study would argue that this is the case for educators of African American youth as well. Her research suggests that African American youth and adults may benefit more from Continuing

Professional Education programs when they connect with the instructor, their fellow students, and the program goals (p. 38). Effective programs should allow African American learners to connect their own lived experience to the goals of the program.

Vanessa Sheared also suggests that effective adult education programs must “give voice” to the learners’ lived experience so that they can challenge the status quo and achieve their personal goals. It is through this challenging of the status quo that effective education reform will occur. The political nature of education resurfaces as a consideration in the effectiveness of continuing professional education programs that serve African American adults. Ms. Sheared insists that “African American adult’s lived experiences are grounded in race, class, gender and other cultural factors that can contribute to their understanding of the process for producing knowledge” (p. 44). The experiences of African American students in K-12 also suggest that students’ perceptions and value for academic success are rooted in the presumptions of their culture (Wiggin, 2007).

To summarize, considerations for academic success for African American students of all ages in this research necessitates inquiry around the role of socialization, racism, culturally relevant curriculum, and critical race theory. It was the expectation of this researcher that the stories of the African-American adult participants regarding their own academic success and experience as lifelong learners would resonate across some of these same considerations. Additionally, the participants’ narratives generated other

considerations that challenge education reformers to “broaden their thinking” in order to create effective solutions which will assure academic success for African American people in this country.

Background

Prior to the 1960's the suburban city that is the focus of this research was a mix of racial and ethnic groups that consisted of five neighborhoods made up of primarily of working class residents. The city experienced a rapid racial transition mitigated by stages of white flight in the mid to late 1960's. According to W. Dennis Keating (1994, p. 84) this last stage of re-segregation that lasted into the 1970's crystallized as “those whites who were supportive of racial integration grew discouraged, and many left, leaving behind a shrinking white population.” Keating further indicates that real estate broker patterns and the inability of the local government to address the rapid changing racial patterns that led to re-segregation for African Americans in the city were also important variables in the change to this city by the late 1970's. He also notes that this community had traditionally had lower rents than the large urban city or surrounding suburbs since the early 1900's (Keating, p 93).

The population in this city has been over 90 percent African American since the middle 1980's according to the U.S. Census. This is a stark contrast to the population in the 1940's and 50's when the population was primarily middle and upper class European Americans, and now the community classifies as an urban community in terms of mean household income and the percentage

of children at or below the poverty level (Keating, 1994). In the 1970's and 1980's, the community was classified as a working class suburban community. The Midwestern city that is the location of the target school in this study consists of essentially 5 neighborhoods that cover 11 census tracts. The city is approximately 7 miles across and 7 miles wide. The median income in the community has dropped consistently over the last 40 years. The target city was incorporated as a city in 1911. The entire city experienced a racial transition from mixed ethnicity, although primarily European American prior to the 1960's. By 1980 however, the U.S. Census reported that the population was now 86 percent African American (Keating, 1994).

By 1990, the city became primarily a working class and lower income community. The total population change during the 1990's was -17.7 percent (City Data, 2010) which was down from 40,000 in 1970 to 25,291 in 2010. According to national statistics by 2008, over 32 percent of the total population lived at the poverty level and 15.4 percent lived below 50 percent of the poverty level. For the African American population in the State, the number in this city by 2008 was significantly higher. The median income and the percentage of residents who owned their homes also declined over time (Ibid).

Since as early as the 1970's the local district where the subjects in this study attended included 6 elementary schools, one junior high and one high school that served all five neighborhoods (City of East Cleveland website, history page). Students who graduated from the local high school are the target of this investigation. As a result of rapid population changes in this

Midwestern community, African American students in the district since the mid 1970's and 1980's had the opportunity to experience public education in America in a suburban school district that afforded them classrooms where they were clearly the majority. In 2010 the district serves approximately 3,500 students, primarily (Ohio Department of Education website, 2010) as the population in the city has continued to decline from its original 37,991 in 1960 (Keating, 1992, p. 79) to a little over 25,000 in 2010 (City Data, 2010).

Research Questions

This dissertation addressed two research questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of the African American Adults who were educated in the same predominately African American Midwestern public school district, over a 20-year period?
- 2) What factors do African American adults who successfully graduated from high school perceive as critical to their academic success and lifelong learning?

Definitions

The following definitions apply to this study:

Academic Success refers to the successful graduation from high school or the receipt of a General Educational Development (GED) for African Americans in this study.

Achievement Gap The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) notes that “Achievement gaps occur when one group of students out performs another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).”

Cultural Competence refers to an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures. Cultural Competence comprises four components: (a) Awareness of one’s own cultural worldview, (b) Attitude towards cultural differences, (c) Knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and (d) cross-cultural skills. Developing cultural competence results in an ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures (references).

Critical Race Theory in this study borrows from the work of Derrick Bell (2002). It refers to the need to examine the impact of issues such as race, gender or class and the experiences of individuals from these groups as they intersect with institutions. In this research the reference is to the systems of K-12 public education and post-secondary and continuing professional education systems for adults.

Limitations of the Study

As an African American woman who is a first generation college graduate, who also happens to be a product of American public school education, the main bias brought by this author to this research is the belief that African American people can and do value the experience of success in the current education system. As the researcher, she also acknowledges this

bias and has attempted to ensure objectivity in the research design. The selection of questions is grounded in existing research and in the principles of Narrative Inquiry. Efforts to assure objectivity are evident in the selection of participants and the analysis of the stories. Individuals were provided with the criteria for participation in this study via email based on their membership in the Alumni Organization and exercised their option to participate in the study through their initiation of contact with this researcher. An additional effort this researcher undertook was to allow participants in the storytelling interviews an opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy of transcription and interpretation of ideas.

Another limitation of this study is the fact that African American adults were asked to reflect on experiences that occurred in their lives when they were high school students. For some of the participants their experience of high school was over 30 years ago. Some information may have been lost in their reflection of memories and significant experiences from their teen years. Elizabeth Pachler and John Daly (2009) note that some truth might be lost in individuals telling their own stories; however, the breadth of their experiences is still valid in the stories they are being invited to share. The majority of these adults may well have had few other opportunities to reflect on the impact of their high school experiences to graduation in connection to other choices they made in life. They might also have shared in the education experiences of others post high school completion. Thus the results of the opportunity of the participants to tell their stories in the methodology of this study is consistent

with the framework put forth by Pachler and Daly (2009) who define “the concept of narrative as a way in which individuals represent and organize experience in order to learn from it and make it worth sharing with others with social contexts” (p. 6). Participation in this inquiry may have enhanced their ability to reflect on their own experiences even more, which may have added value to their contribution via their stories and thus to the impact on the overall results of this study.

Because some of the participants were selected through the high school alumni website, there may be some limitation on the representativeness of the participants. Not all alumni participate on the website. However, the alumni website provided access to a sufficiently diverse pool of potential participants and therefore was a useful approach for recruiting participants within the study focused on the 1970 and 1980 time frame. Additionally, the study allowed for sufficient representation by gender.

As a case study, the participants all completed high school from one Midwestern community school. While some might argue this limits the generalizability of the study, the researcher believes that it does not. This case was selected because it represents one of the few school districts that have had a predominantly African American student body for over 30 years. As such, it is likely that the participants reflected various attributes of class and values that are found in most African American populations across the country. The voice of these participants adds value to the discussion of

factors that impacted academic success for African American students across America, and over time, as well.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to delve into the research that illuminates the problem that this investigation seeks to address. As previously mentioned, it is the belief of this researcher that eliciting stories from African American adults who successfully graduated from a Midwestern suburban high school would yield information that can inform policy and practice decisions about how best to promote and support African American students in K-12 and adult and post-secondary education to achieve academic success. While education reform is usually driven from the ideas and priorities of mainstream educators and sometime minimally informed policymakers, this literature review suggests that there are many factors other than standards, assessments, and newer teachers holding advanced degrees that should influence education reform to prepare America to excel in the 21st century.

There is a limited body of research that attempts to elicit the opinions of African- American students in the creation of effective school reform (Howard, 2001). During my Doctoral Studies in an education program in which the

primary focus was education in an urban setting, the issue of school reform was addressed from several different perspectives. The commonality in these multi-disciplinary approaches included their emphasis on the development of a determination of who should improve --the teachers, the parents or the students-- in order to help African- American students realize the full benefit of participation in the American education system. Among these approaches, the theoretical perspectives on the relevance of culturally competent instruction and the integration of cultural themes into the education of all children contributed most clearly to the theoretical framework for this study (Delpit, 1988, Ladson-Billings 1995). In addition, the work of Sankofa, Hurley, Allen, & Boykin (2005) and Tyler, Boykin, and Dillihunt (2005) contribute to the framework as well in terms of their support of the role of the African American cultural theme of communalism to African American student achievement. Again, Critical Race theory provides the overarching theoretical framework for this study.

Education Perspectives - Last 40 years

An understanding of the impact African American culture has on academic success is a critical factor in pursuing elements that need to be addressed in effective school reform. In her 2004 Lecture, "It's Not the Culture of Poverty, It's the Poverty of Culture: The Problem with Teacher Education," Gloria Ladson-Billings (2004) accuses the field of education with "randomly and regularly using culture to inhibit its ability to effectively educate African Americans" (p. 104). She attributes this improper deficit-based value of

culture to the failure of teacher education programs to inform and instruct students of education about the role and value of culture in learning.

Gloria Ladsen- Billings notes “So at the same moment teacher education students learn nothing about culture, they use it with authority as one of the primary explanations for everything from school failure to problems with behavior management and discipline” (p. 104). The literature suggests that the basic fundamentals of education have not changed in the last 40 years in America, and in fact, the minor modifications in values that have occurred have continued to support falsehoods that suggest that African Americans do not value academic success and very few can achieve it. Again, current Federal Department of Education practices have not move much further, as evident in the 2010 priorities of the Department.

Education Philosophies that Distract from Discourse on African American Student Success

Theories that suggest that African American students of all ages have no appreciation of the value of education detract from the ugly reality that African American voice is often left out of school reform plans and policies. Student Oppositional Identity theory is one of those that serves this purpose as it appears to “generate the most vitality in the achievement debate in the literature” (Wiggan, 2007, p. 319). This theory explains the apparent low achievement of African American students, as measured by standardized achievement tests, as primarily a factor of choice. According to Wiggan,

“essentially, this position assumes that Whiteness is equated with achievement; therefore, Black students are compelled to resist the achievement ideology to preserve their ethnic identity” (p. 319). Wiggan posits that John Ogbu apparently attributes this choice to alienation imposed on African American students as a result of their marginal social status and their perception of the existence of an insurmountable job ceiling for African American workers. This theory tends to blame low achievement on students’ peer groups and oppositional subcultures and completely discounts the fact that “some students” may become alienated from racial exclusion that they often face in educational institutions. Hence, a focus on this theory distracts from the promotion of discourse around African American student success, discounts institutional racism, and in doing so impedes efforts to eliminate existing institutional barriers in the current education system.

Other popular texts also serve to reinforce the notion that African Americans and high academic achievement of youth and adults are not a perfect combination. The focus of John Ogbu’s book entitled *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb* is academic disengagement (Ogbu, 2003). His work focuses on the impact of societal factors, while he does not discount the potential impact of community factors on academic engagement for African American students. He suggests that the “academic disengagement and performance of minority students are influenced by two sets of factors: (a) the system, and (b), community forces” (p. 55). He further suggests that community forces vary across communities.

John Ogbu situates his work in a framework that categorizes African Americans as non-immigrant minorities who unlike immigrant minorities, do not base their strategies to achieve academically in trust in schools and teachers that might care about them--even if they do not value them. He attributes this failure of African Americans pursuit of academic achievement to “their emphasis on social relations and caring rather than” (p. 54) the expertise of the teachers. He equates this distrust to intentional alienation from education systems which he argues is behavior that is not conducive to school success. Furthermore he blames African- American parents and community members for choosing to hold the systems responsible for academic success as opposed to their children. His theory of oppositional identity is rooted in generalizations that frame the problem as solely embedded in the community and he does not extend the same study and critique to institutions, such as those that sustain public education.

Greg Wiggan’s (2007) basic critique of Ogbu’s theory is that “antiachievement attitudes” exist in White students as well, and therefore “are not as generalizable as some researchers would suggest” (p. 321). In the quest to continue effective dialogue with African Americans about academic success, Wiggan’s review of the literature notes that the focus for the incongruence between African American students of all ages and academic achievement debates shifted in the 1970’s to sociological factors as opposed to biological factors. Thus, an attempt to seek an explanation in

either the biological or attitudes of African Americans suggests that members of other cultures do not possess anti-achievement attitudes.

Oftentimes researchers cite differences in the home environments of African- American students as the cause for their underachievement. Supporters of this philosophy include Bernstein (1971), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), and Coleman in 1966. A key challenge to positive discourse about African American student success is that this philosophy “presumes that the achievement gap is present before the beginning of formal schooling because of limitations in their home” (p. 315). Studies that determined that African American homes were not enriched family environments had their roots in this era, primarily citing deficiencies in African American parent values as a likely cause for the achievement gap. This argument is shared by theorists who suggest that cultural capital that is higher in middle class European-American culture than in African American homes are a variable in academic success between cultures. Michael O’Neil (2000) and Susan Dumais and Aaryn Ward (2010) argue that cultural capital variables and academic success may not be the biggest challenge to equity of success in the American education system. Once again, this social class value approach successfully took the attention off seeking the input of African American students and adults in discussions of how to maximize school resources in order to improve the quality of education offered to African American students in America.

Another approach that serves to dilute the value of the African American voice in school transformation discussions is the “teacher expectancy” perspective which also gained ground in the 1970’s. This perspective builds on the belief that “the tendency is for some teachers to justify teaching Black students less because of their assumptions about Black students’ deficiencies” (Wiggin, 2007, p.317). The work of Lisa Delpit that spans her career around culturally relevant teaching strategies and cultural competent instruction responds to this perspective. The challenge with placing the emphasis on gaps in academic achievement as a result of negative teacher perceptions is that it assigns all of the power to teachers and presupposes that African American students do not contribute anything valuable to their learning experience. Unfortunately this perception also inhibits giving voice to the lived experience of the African American student or parent in the quest for understanding their perceptions of academic success.

Factors that Impact African American Student Success

In discovering the factors that exclude the African American student voice from school reform policy decision in this country, it is important to underscore the reality that African American students do, in fact, hold a positive value for academic success. Limited qualitative research exists that supports this reality and where the research does exist it does not always rise to the top in policy planning and education reformation discussions. In this next section of the literature review, the literature depicting the success of African American students is detailed.

Previous research on African American students has suggested that African American students do not value academic achievement or those from their culture who achieve academic success however; this philosophy is contradictory to this researcher's experience in education. The findings from the work of Tyler, Boykin and Dillihunt (2005) suggest that there is more to be learned about the perceptions of African Americans on academic success. The purpose of their research was to identify the attributes that they felt were important characteristics of high performance amongst their peers. The findings of their work indicated that the children in the study rated the high academic achievers more favorably if verve and communalism were evident in the descriptions of how they interacted with fellow students.

The research team of Sankofa, Hurley, Allen, and Boykin (2005) investigated the extent to which African American children's own attitudes towards mainstream cultural and African American cultural values in the classroom in fact reveal the impact of the socialization process in schools. The themes addressed were verve, communalism, individualism, and competition. Communalism emphasizes the interdependence of people and verve refers to the ability to manage multiple stimuli, i.e., multi-task (Tyler, Boykin, & Dillihunt, 2005). Individualism with an emphasis on individual accomplishment and competition emphasizing win/lose situations are identified as mainstream forms of socialization. Evidence of individualism and competition socialization styles is apparent in mainstream school practices and pedagogy. Class rank systems, tracking, and speed math tests are

examples of practices that reinforce the value of individualism and competition in schools. This study aims to contribute to the discourse about the natural integration of African American values and academic success. The students felt that their parents and peers would make similar selections. These findings support the existence of these two principles as relevant characteristics of African American cultural values that are predictive of academic success. It also suggests that when verve and communalism are encouraged in the learning environment, there is likely to be a higher rate of academic success for African American students.

An additional challenge this researcher has identified with some of the pervasive thinking about culture and education is the misconception that culture must be nurtured or taught to the children when culture is something that is possessed, by a group or an individual. The work of Sankofa, Hurley, Allen, and Boykin (2005) and Tyler, Boykin, & Dillihunt, (2005) contributes to the significance of this study as well in terms of their support of the role of the African American cultural theme of communalism as a catalyst to African-American student learning. Cultural differences between African American culture and mainstream school culture impact students' perception of the quality of the learning experience as well influences their desire to participate. Their framework further suggests that African American adults promote different values of socialization in their homes and communities than mainstream society, as do many immigrant cultures.

Greg Wiggan (2007) conducted a study that revealed the importance of several school effects that African American students in his study considered to impact their achievement in high school. Wiggan notes that the students reported three main contributors to their high school success: “1) teacher practices, engaging pedagogy; 2) participation in extracurricular activities; and 3) the state scholarship as performance incentive” (p. 327). This research suggests that increasing financing in school reform would provide more opportunities for students in school and increase their chances for going to college. Wiggan concludes that the overemphasis on oppositional culture theory and other explanations for low student achievement prohibits a focus on other critical aspects that benefit African American performance in schools. This research study aimed to add student perceptions of their learning environment to the limited body of research that currently exists on African American students who achieve academic success.

When the idea of culture appears in the research, the argument often focuses on how to insert mainstream culture into the compulsory education system. Cornel Pewardy (1993, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995) reflects this concept when he asserts that one of the reasons (North American) Indian children experience difficulty in American schools is that “educators have traditionally attempted to insert culture into the education instead of inserting education into the culture” (p. 376). One of the challenges to understanding African Americans’ experience with American education is some of the modern thinking about culture and education which promotes the

misconception that culture must be nurtured or taught to the children when again, culture is something that is possessed by a group or an individual. The desire to see culture as missing from a group is often rooted in assumptions that the culture of the dominant group is ideal and that anything else is subpar. Within this context, the presumption that African American culture is not conducive to academic success is evidence of racial bias and thus deserves critical analysis. The opportunity for students to promote their cultural values must be acceptable, and accompanied by the belief that the values of the culture are indeed valid and aligned with the achievement of positive outcomes from the experience of learning. Howard Hill (year) found that it is most essential that “teachers truly believe they can teach minority students effectively.” In addition to the “requisite skills, attitudes and behaviors” (Hill, p.3), teachers who teach minority students must hold the belief that all students bring their own experiences to the learning opportunity.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum

The work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) is important to recognize since she suggests that “the dilemma for African American students becomes one of negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence. Thus, “cultural relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically,” (p. 476). The literature supports the notion that African Americans both value academic achievement and seek to succeed academically while maintaining a positive sense of self.

The critique of the K-12 public education system is not dissimilar from the literature on the experiences of African American adults in post-secondary learning opportunities, including Continuing Professional Education. This body of literature contributes to the conceptualization of the framework for this study. The specific needs of African American adult participants in Continuing Education and other adult learning programs have not been a primary research focus in the field for some time. Participants have been considered using a mainstream American approach that does not emphasize the value of cultural experiences in learning, for African Americans or members of other racial minorities in the U.S. Talmadge C. Guy (1999) suggests that the concept of Culturally Relevant Adult Education has not been infused into the current system of education because of the pattern of continuing social inequality that is perpetuated in the adult education system in this country.

Elizabeth A. Peterson (1999) suggests that education is a political process and a social activity because it has “always been rooted in the antiracist struggle” (p. 79). Her article suggests that an overlooked but primary purpose of adult education for African American adults and adult educators needs to be about “a focus on the antiracist struggle with new strategies for surviving in a racist society” (p. 79). If CPE is to accept this challenge, a model for ongoing professional education and other venues for adult learning that emphasizes cultural challenges and promotes solutions in the content and the delivery strategies may be required. Instructors and program planners will need to understand the demographics of their audience before an instructional plan

can be written. Both the work of Guy (1999) and Peterson (1999) clearly support the framework for this dissertation study.

Research on the impact of culturally relevant instruction on African American student success is supportive of the assertion that African American socialization is amenable to academic success. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2005) defines culturally relevant teaching as pedagogy that is committed to collective empowerment not just the empowerment of the individual (p. 160). She also notes that culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a "vehicle" for learning.

Critical race theory provides a perspective that suggests the relevance of culturally competent instructors and the integration of cultural themes into the education of all children (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings 1995). Historically, the perceptions of the dominant culture have been used to make judgments about the beliefs, values and potential of minority groups (Woodson, 1933). Instruction, research and policies are also often defined within these same biases which too often frame the African American experience in education in America. Again, this research promotes the idea that the opportunity for students to promote their cultural values must be acceptable, and accompanied by the belief that the values of the culture are indeed valid and aligned with the achievement of positive outcomes from the experience of learning.

In addition, culturally relevant curriculum must be delivered by socially conscious and aware instructors, according to Vanessa Sheard (1999). She suggests that only adult educators who understand how their personal philosophies and experiences affect African American learners (and other program participants) in their practice can deliver effective continuing education programs. Her research suggests that African Americans may benefit more from education programs when they connect with the instructors, their fellow students, and the program goals (p. 38). Effective programs should allow African American learners to connect their own lived experience to the goals of the program. She suggests that individuals may physically or emotionally disconnect from programs when the goals do not meet their specific needs. Similarly experiences of African American youth, evidenced by low performance and low and time-limited engagement with schools in the K-12 system suggest that the solution to increasing the effectiveness of programs lies in understanding the specific experiences of the youngest students.

Low Participation of African American's in Continuing Professional Education

As the participation of African American adults in Continuing Professional Education (CPE) continues to decline, America will move farther away from its goal to be competitive in a global economy. CPE consists of a continuum of learning opportunities that are available to individuals who have surpassed the level of basic education and seek to continuously impact society through their chosen or current profession. The overarching challenge is for continuing

professional education to “make a demonstrable impact on the quality of professional practice” (Cervero, 2000, p.11) such that the positive impact is felt at the individual, organizational, and societal level.

Continuing Professional Education differs from basic education because individuals choose to participate in CPE based on personal decisions that participation in the program will move them forward in their careers or at minimum, allow them to remain at the level they have chosen in their careers. These individuals have obtained basic proficiency in the compulsory education system. Recertification, re-licensure, promotion possibilities, higher salaries, changing careers, and the desire for additional knowledge for the sake of “having more knowledge” all serve as motivational factors that encourage individuals to seek out and participate in professional education opportunities.

Several of the authors engaged in this area of research related to the involvement of African Americans in Continuing Professional Education programs, either as educators or participants, note the lack of research on this topic and compel others to delve further in to this area of study because there are so many questions that need to be answered (Guy, 1999; Isaac, Guy & Valentine, 2001). Several also refer to the perceived value of the use of qualitative research designs to flesh out the rationales behind individual actions and define solutions, as opposed to the use of quantitative research (Denny, 1992).

The Role of Research in Raising a Voice

Quantitative research has primarily served the purpose of suggesting that there may be some differences in group perceptions of Continuing Professional Education programs but quantitative studies have not advanced the discussion to the level of the assertion of a need to change or to build alternative strategies that will improve the outcomes experienced by African American-adult learners. Detailed analyses of the role of race in explaining adults' motivations for participation in adult education and other learning programs that would be useful in the development of culturally relevant CPE programs is often absent as a result of a limitation of quantitative research. Most often, African American adult learners do not make up a large enough portion of the sample to garner statistically sound influences for the population from research studies (Guy et. al., 2001).

Another unfortunate influence on the limited amount of research on African American participants in CPE programs and other forms of adult education is the low numbers of tenured African American faculty members at research universities. Sherwood Smith (2004) notes that "The lack of diversity among faculty members conflicts with the roles of leadership and change agent that adult educators lay claim to in the face of the reality of a multicultural society in the United States" (p. 59). Constricting factors in understanding the needs of the African American adult CPE participant such as these are consistent with recent research whose aim is to understand the relevance of culturally competent education for African American children. It is also a result of the sporadic attention in education research to focus the

discourse on the value of multicultural education in America. It is necessary to understand the experiences of African American adults and their educational and CPE needs so that they can promote solutions that will help mainstream America understand and help African American children learn.

Talmadge Guy (1999) defines culturally relevant programs as those that focus on the provision of cultural education. Cultural education is referred to as “education that focuses on the positive aspects of learner culture and uses that knowledge to help learners recreate a world in the image of their own dreams” (p.94). Several important aspects of culturally relevant education are learner transformation, empowerment, community based programming and public policy, and attention to the politics of cultural differences. Continuing professional education programs could enhance the learning experience of African American adults when they “incorporate and acknowledge aspects of the adult learners’ culture into the educational process” (p. 94). The findings of this research validates this proposed study because it supports the need to gather more qualitative information on the relevancy of the experience of African American adults who have achieved academic success in order to improve the educational process.

Rudolph A. Cain (1995) attributes the absence of the work of Alain Leroy Locke and his profound impact on the advancement of the field of African American continuing professional education to “a significant void in the literature” (p.88). He believes that Locke’s “significant, long-term involvement and leadership in the adult education movement (p. 88)” was critical because

Locke insisted on greater inclusion of African Americans in CPE as instructors, and as participants, in the early 1900's. As an evaluator of African American adult learning programs, Locke was convinced of the "value of culture based programs in enhancing program success" (p. 92). Cain notes that the "the nation's refusal, resistance or inability to tackle serious educational problems during the early part of this century have now come back to haunt us as we move into the 21st century" (p. 97).

Today's dialogue about the participation and success of African Americans in CPE and that of African Americans at all levels can be enhanced with an understanding of Locke's philosophy that quality adult education programs "are a major conduit for achieving the ends we seek" and his insistence that the issues be addressed and not ignored. Cain's work is relevant because information about Locke is not often referenced in Adult Education programs, and Locke's contribution appears to be quite valuable to discussions about the development of effective adult learning programs for African American adults and supports the value of this study, as it strives to capture the African American voice.

Effective Teaching

The work of Karen Teel (1998) and her associates address the issue of the value of teacher attitudes in the provision of effective instruction for African American students. This team conducted action research that represents a two-year longitudinal study. The research question for Teel's study was as

follows: in what ways would the alternative teaching strategies, which focused on four key principles, have a positive impact on the students' motivation over the course of each year of this study? The four strategies were Effort-based Grading, Increased Student Responsibility and Choice, Validation of Cultural Heritage, and Multiple Performance Opportunities. The classroom teacher in this study was a trained researcher. Classroom observation, journaling, and surveys were used to collect data in this Narrative Inquiry process. Overall, the study concluded that provided with classroom conditions that support the four strategies, low performing students at risk of school failure became motivated and engaged in a positive way, just like the more "high-achieving" students.

Paulette Isaac and Michael Rowland (2002) conducted research to identify factors that deter African American adults from participation in CPE and other adult learning opportunities. This team identified the nonexistence of literature "relative to educational deterrents among African Americans within non-formal educational settings" (p. 102). This research focused on the African American Christian church as the location for programming also. The findings of this study suggest that educators must modify learning formats and instructional techniques to meet the needs of particular adult learning styles in the programs (p. 116). The relevance of the curriculum, diversity in programming and effective communication between the learner and the program planning team members were found to be critical barriers to the participation of the

African-adult learners, regardless of the locale of the program. This research effectively illustrated a role for the African American Church in CPE programs.

Vanessa Sheared (1999) also suggests that effective adult learning programs must “give voice” to the learners’ lived experience so that they can challenge the status quo and achieve their personal goals. Her discussion of voice resonates with the discussion of discourse that I engaged in during an Urban Planning doctoral level course of study. The political nature of education re-surfaced in the course as a consideration in the effectiveness of continuing professional education programs that serve African American adults. Again, Sheared insists that “African American adults’ lived experiences are grounded in race, class, gender and other cultural factors that can contribute to their understanding of the process for producing knowledge” (p. 44). As such, instructors and program planners must be willing to grow and change their own perspectives as they are influenced by their students, in order to ensure the delivery of programs moves all of the participants forward.

Increased awareness of culturally relevant instruction and implementation of more aggressive strategies on the part of education program planners, business and industry leaders and qualified planning table participants is required to truly validate and support the African American adult learner in advancing her or his own needs. The findings of Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2007) reveal “the approach of integrating students’ experiences as an explicit part of the learning agenda [which] encourages them to participate to the fullest extent in their own education” (p. 44). Her work focuses on African American

women and their responses to a culturally relevant curriculum. Efforts that build on strategies such as this will advance the quality of all education programs to meet the needs of various cultural groups represented in the participants of any program. The availability of adult learning programs of the highest caliber will help all learners to achieve individual outcomes. Additionally, recognition of the impact of racism on the development of the field of continuing professional education is a prerequisite for effective program planning. Context and content are equally relevant in teaching, learning, and program development.

Elice Rogers and Catherine Hansman (2004) suggest that effective teaching strategies for African Americans in an urban setting must promote social responsibility in the students in order to help them enhance their own quality of life (p. 26). These researchers further indicate that educators of African Americans adults should be reflective practitioners. They suggest that as reflective practitioners they must “recognize that the intentions of legislation” and other social programs “do not always match the reality of the lives of the participants at the margins, or the type of support available for programs to serve urban adults” (p. 25).

African American children who experience these same social realities must be effectively prepared to navigate similar systems that are often promoted in the current “pay-to-play” system. This system tends to prohibit access for the students to quality education programs and services. This awareness also extends to the need for greater access to accurate information about various

high quality options in education. Effective teachers of African- American students of all ages must “begin to understand who benefits” (p. 22) from current policy and legislation and then prepare their students to change these injustices that they face, and to overcome them, to increase their access to effective education and education opportunities. There is also a need for the institutions to change their structures, as well.

Presence Equals Voice

This literature review has identified a significant number of variables based on research that may be congruent with the factors that the participants in this investigation will identify as critical or irrelevant to their own high school graduations and pursuit of lifelong learning opportunities after high school. Clearly where their input is congruent with the research, the task is now to amplify their voices to position them in the discussion about school reform efforts and education policy making. Where new information becomes apparent the task at hand will then be twofold. First, it will necessitate further research to validate the findings from their stories, and second, it will require that the new knowledge be used to inform school reform efforts, policies and practices.

It is the belief of this author that the identification of solutions to existing gaps in academic success as measured by dominating discursive practices can be best determined through the use of a critical race theory framework. Through the use of a critical lens, it was possible to identify issues, challenges

and solutions more accurately and in a way that is representative of historical and cultural variation. Adrienne Dixson and Celia K. Rousseau (2005) believe that this might then encourage education experts and reformers to validate their practices, and beliefs against real life experiences, thus creating more effective solutions.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Methodology

This qualitative research study examined the reflections of eight African American adults on their own high school journey to graduation in the late 20th Century from one Midwestern public school district where African American students represented the majority of the student body. The particular emphasis of this study was to identify common factors that the participants perceive as critical to their own high school graduation through Narrative Inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry. Several authors refer to the perceived value of the use of qualitative research to flesh out the rationales behind individual actions and define solutions, as opposed to the use of quantitative research (Denny, 1992). The primary methodology that framed this study was narrative inquiry. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2006) suggest that researchers come to each new inquiry field living our stories and that our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories (p. 478-479). They further assert

that “People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories” (p. 479). This researcher believes that collecting the stories of African American adults regarding their high school experience would illuminate factors that impact academic success of African American students in American public education systems and would inform, challenge and authenticate current discourse on the same subject. It was my hope that as Carola Conle (2000) suggests, “...the personal will be permeated with underlying cultural issues that narrative will clarify, or expose and thus give the work a wider significance” (p. 189).

Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin (2006) utilize narrative inquiry to engage in “simultaneous exploration of three commonplaces, temporality, sociality and place” (p.479). They rely on the definition of narrative inquiry that Clandinin and Connelly put forth in 2006 when they identified the key components of narrative inquiry as a methodology where “story in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experiences of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful,” and “where narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry... and is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience” (p.477). Jean Clandinin, Debbie Pushor and Anne Orr (year) expound upon the three commonplaces in narrative inquiry that made this methodology effective for this study.

In regards to the commonplace of temporality, Clandinin et al. note that “It is important to always try to understand people, places and events as in process, as always in transition” (p. 23). This concept acknowledges the

notion that “events and people always have a past, present and a future” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Education occurs over the course of a person’s lifetime and it is this author’s belief that the solutions to eliminating the achievement gap in education for African American students will be illuminated in *knowing* the events in the education process of these individuals and finding ways to replicate the positives and mitigate the negatives for current students of all ages. Although there was no question regarding post-secondary success, the participants' narrative on academic success often extended beyond the k-12 structure and therefore this dimension is also discussed as one of a number of findings.

The perception of an achievement gap is supported by national efforts to collect and disseminate data based on standard statistical analyses, conducted over time and based on standardized test scores. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) notes that “Achievement gaps occur when one group of students outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant” (NCES, 2010). NAEP data is used to report trends and gaps in test scores specifically changes in scores, however the data provides no insight on the causes of the gap. According to the NAEP online update (July, 2010), various factors impact changes reported about the achievement gap. Demographic changes as well as policy variations from state to state at each level of government can impact reports on the sizes of existing gaps.

Clandinin, Pushor and Orr (2007) further expound upon the value of personal and social conditions in narrative inquiries. They build upon the definition of these conditions as originally put forth in the 2006 *Handbook* authored by Connelly and Clandinin (p. 480) where even the feelings, desires and hopes of the participant are considered in understanding the narrative. Furthermore, these authors emphasize the importance of the environment, and surrounding factors, forces and people on the context that the individual provides in story (p. 23). The interview questions for this research study were intentionally open ended, and probing questions were used to get the context that surrounds the stories, wherein solutions to the current dilemma of how to successfully educate African American and youth were illuminated.

The final commonplace of narrative inquiry, place, helped to unearth the value, if any, that participants attributed to where and how they were educated in high school. Clandinin, et. al. (2000) suggests that “a narrative researcher needs to think through the impact of each place on the experience” (p. 23). The emphasis in the interview protocol for this study was on the significant factors that participants believed contributed to their high school graduation at one specific high school where the population of the city and the district became almost 100 percent African American. The authors also note that “specificity of location is critical” (p. 481) for the storytellers and that the researcher should clearly focus the participants on the impact of place. It was deemed a benefit to select participants who graduated from the same high school to contextualize the stories that contributed to their high school

graduation and impact on their futures within the contexts of time, social relationships and space.

Clandinin and Connelly (2006) suggest that researchers come to each new inquiry field living our stories and that our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories. This investigation utilized several of the key components of narrative inquiry which includes interviewing and analysis of stories within the framework of the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry.

Another relevant aspect of narrative inquiry in this study is that this methodology used individual reflections as the primary source of data. The use of this methodology supports the value for the researcher to conduct a personal narrative at the start of the data collection. In this instance, the researcher has a common experience as an alumnus of the selected school district. The process of “giving an account of himself or herself in the study” (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007, p. 482) assisted the researcher to understand her own personal biases, which did arise in the analysis. Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin further suggest that narrative inquirers “need to be self-conscious of their potentially intimate connection with the living, with the field texts collected, and with their research texts” (ibid.).

The creation of a personal narrative was found to be valuable when this investigator conducted a related pilot study and was employed again in this study. Clandinin, Pushor and Orr (2007) emphasize the importance of writing

a narrative beginning at the start of a narrative inquiry project that “speaks to the researcher’s relationship to, and interest in, the inquiry” (25). This researcher sought to provide personal justification for her interest in this project and “how it would be insightful to changing or thinking differently about the researcher’s own and practices of others (p.25)” about solving education disparities in American that sustain the reality on an achievement gap.

Gaining Entry

Nicholas Hookaway (2009) suggests that it is necessary for the researcher to establish an online presence “as a means of entering the world of potential research participants” (p. 100). As a registered member of the alumni website where the invitation for the individuals to participate in the narrative interviews was posted, this researcher established a profile on the website. The profile was approved by the webmaster and included a photo and a specific email address for contact information. This researcher has also posted in other discussions on the site which helped to establish a presence as an insider and ensured insider validity.

Eight narrative inquiries were provided to individuals in an interview lasting up to 90 minutes. The sessions were audio taped and transcribed. Once the transcripts were complete the transcripts were analyzed. The interviewer shared the themes with each of the participants in a variety of formats, email and face to face, on the in order to mitigate the effects of interviewer bias on the data. These efforts to reconnect with the participants allowed for a member check on emerging themes from the compilation of

transcripts. Some participants denied the opportunity to review the compilation, insisting that they were confident that the recordings would be accurate and due to time constraints in their own lives. All interviews were held at mutually agreed upon locations which included restaurants, coffee houses and private homes.

A template was designed to address the two research questions that form the basis for this study. This template was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board. The template is included in Appendix A. The questions are aligned with the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry. Probing questions will be added as needed to ensure the accuracy of the data. Similar questions were used in an earlier pilot study and the questions were found to ignite conversation and spark memories in the participants that led to a productive dialogue. In addition, while no specific questions were asked about individual's post-secondary activities, most participants's connected their high school experience to their post-secondary aspirations and/or participation.

The questions that comprised the interview template were:

1. Share some memories or stories of social and learning experiences from your high school years that you feel had a big impact on your graduating from high school. What was the impact? Why?
2. What factors motivated you to continue in high school until graduation?

3. What is your definition of academic success? Share a time or some times when you felt you could achieve academic success during your high school career.
4. Share some examples of situations that you experienced in high school when people made you feel that you were 'smart' or intelligent. What actions did they take? How did you feel? What if any behaviors did you change or employ as a result of that feeling?
5. What was the school like when you were there? Was there a sense of school pride or being connected to each other? Share some examples of when you felt there was or was not a sense of 'community' in the school.
6. Could you talk about any time you might have felt a sense of disconnect, if at all, with school – or a sense of struggle, either academically or socially?
7. Do you recall any ways that the community partnered with the school to help students achieve? Can you share some examples of when you felt the support of the community in your own high school experience?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Case Study

In addition to narrative inquiry, this study also borrows from elements of the Case Study methodology. Specifically, this research examines the reflections of African American adults on their experiences in one specific

Midwestern school district. Sharan B. Merriam and Associates (2002) describe a case study as a choice on “what is to be studied in relationship to the selected theoretical framework that underpins a study” (p.178). They further note that in qualitative research the focus is the “search for meaning and understanding” (179). There is only one high school in this small city. Although the city is officially classified as a suburb of the larger metropolitan city that it borders, the economics of the city and the social status of the residents make the dynamics of the city similar to an urban area.

In this research, the focus on the selected school is critical to the value of the research as a case study. Sharan Merriam and Associates (2002) noted that the selection in a case study is done “purposefully” (p. 179). The location of the target school for this purpose was specifically selected because of the composition of the school and its relationship to the community in which it is the only high school in the city. The time period was selected because African Americans represented the majority of the student body by the end of the 1970’s as a result of re-segregation. The community was referred to as “the community” as was the high school referred to as “the target school” in the remainder of this study.

Sample

Participants were recruited through a posting on the school’s alumni website. Eight individuals were selected to share their stories in individual sessions that lasted up to 90 minutes. Information on the gender, graduation year, race, and neighborhood of residence at graduation was collected via

email for interested participants. Individuals were allotted one week to respond with their interests in sharing their story, face-to-face with this investigator. The basic criterion for participation was initially the need to produce documentation that one graduated from the school in the 70's or 80's and a willingness to participate. Again, this time period was selected because these students had the opportunity to experience public education in a suburban school district where the African Americans were the majority at the school and in the community. They competed academically, musically and in sports against other suburban school districts, also located beyond the central city borders, appropriately categorizing the city as an inner-ring suburb. Thus all of the participants shared this same experience, attending the school either during the transition or immediately following it. Unfortunately, most individuals no longer had documentation of their graduation and the school does not keep records, however so people were held as credible based on their word and some corroboration with other participants. This was possible because some were familiar with each other. It was also evident in the ability of individuals to relate to people and experiences that suggested that they were there. Finally, many participants were either in a profession, as evidenced by business cards or business phone that normally necessitates at least a high school diploma or had earned other post secondary degrees that they could provide proof for.

The study focused on this particular time is due to the conditions present at this time period. Interested individuals were grouped according to

graduation year and gender to get gender representation in the study as well as equal representation from each decade. Four individuals were selected from each decade, and there was equal representation of males and females in the study, excluding an extra female who provided a few responses, because she was present at the conclusion of a scheduled interview. From the pool of those who volunteered to participate, a group of participants were selected, using the criteria of equal representation of graduation across the 1970's or 1980's decades and sufficient gender representation, Although this was primarily a working class community during the decades in question, participants were asked to share information on the education level of one or both parents.

Gloria Ladsen-Billings notes that “meaning is made as a product of dialogue between and among individuals” (p. 38). Narrative stories were collected via interviews with nine African American adults who graduated from the target school district. The researcher invited members from the alumni organization to participate in the study via email. Some individuals were also invited to participate via word of mouth. Finally individuals were current residents in the region as the narrative sessions occurred in a face-to-face format. Individuals were selected from their group of like participants based on meeting the criteria and availability for scheduling in this selection process and were notified via phone or email of their selection. Individuals completed consent forms as required by the Institutional Review Board at the time the interviews were held.

Data Collection

This study reports on stories that have been transcribed via audio recording in a way that preserved the confidentiality of the participants as well as others whose names came up in the telling of stories. Bruce Berg (2001), notes that “confidentiality is an active attempt to remove from the research records any elements that might indicate the identities of the subjects” (p. 57). During the pilot study, this researcher learned that there were times when names, people and situations were familiar to her. The reviewer handled this by acknowledging it immediately to the participants and then giving them the option to proceed with their story. Pursuant to Institutional Review Board requirements, no names were used to identify the respondents in the final report. Individuals signed the consent form for participation at the start of the interview.

Data Analysis

3-Way Axial Coding. 3-Way Coding Procedure (Lee et al, 2007) was utilized to synthesize the data from the online respondents as well as the individual interviews. Ultimately the data from these two sources as well as the literature review was triangulated in order to identify factors that the African Americans attribute to their successful high school completion. These themes were organized across time, space and social relationships as dictated by the narrative inquiry methodology that guides this study. The 3-Way coding

procedure involves the use of open coding to scrutinize the original interview data in order to create categories of related data that basically explains the “raw data”.

Axial coding was used to develop and identify relationships among sub categories that emerged. The researcher then used selective coding to generate main categories that showed a systematic connection with each other and were aligned to the core categories of narrative inquiry which are place, time and social relationships. This level of organization allowed the responses to be organized in to similar categories for analytical purposes. Once everything was initially coded the results of the stories were analyzed in relationship to the two research questions that guided this study.

Researcher Subjectivity

Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2006) suggest that researchers come to each new inquiry field living our stories and that our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories. The narrative inquiry methodology employs several of the key components of narrative inquiry which includes interviewing, and analysis of stories within the framework of the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry. The value of narrative inquiry in this study is that this methodology uses individual lives as the primary source of data. The use of this methodology supports the value for the researcher to include a personal narrative in the report. In this instance, the researcher has a common experience as an alumna of the selected school district. This

process helped the researcher to understand personal bias, which was likely to arise in the analysis, and is also commonplace when stories and experiences are shared. This researcher's personal narrative is found in Appendix B. The creation of this narrative did choose to be valuable in this study just as it did when used in the pilot study.

Summary

Shaun Harper (2008) notes that "most researchers have justifiably opted to call attention to the conditions that continually yield inequitable access and produce stifled outcomes" (p. 1032). He attributes this to the limited number of studies that focus on high achieving African American college students in general. His research framework reflects the philosophy behind this study which is to focus on the factors that promote African American student success from the perspectives of African American high school graduates. This research gave 8 individuals the opportunity to share their stories about where they found success in education in high school and afterwards.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Summary

Study findings suggest that for these participants full community support and expectations set by adults in the community and school supported their success. Positive caring adults, solid peer relationships, and engaged school staff were also identified as critical to their high school graduation. These findings emerged through analysis organized into the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry- time, space, and social relationships, according to the work of Clandinin and Connely (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), within the four commonplaces of time, space and social relationships. Three-way Axial Coding was also used to organize the words and phrases from the participant inquiries into common themes that addressed the three commonplaces. In this chapter I provide a discussion of participant demographics, initial codes, and common themes,

Demographic Characteristics

An overview of the participant demographics is displayed in Table 1. It should be noted that while the methodology called for eight interviews, additional responses were obtained from one other person who accompanied an invited participant to a scheduled interview. As this individual represented the target population and desired to participate, some responses were collected from that individual and are included in this analysis. Also, one participant graduated in the spring of 1990; however, since the bulk of this person's high school career was spent in the latter half of the 1980's this person was deemed appropriate to participate in this study. All characteristics are based on self-report- unfortunately only about half of the participants still had copies of their high school diploma. All of the participants are currently employed in positions that require a high school diploma, at minimum, and none of the participants are currently enrolled in entry-level positions.

The Three Commonplaces

Table 1

Participant Overview

| GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS | |
|---|---|
| Year of Graduation | 5- 1970's 3—1980's 1- 1990 |
| Highest Level of Education Attainment of Parents | 90% of the custodial parents completed High School 2 Parents completed Some College None of the parents of the participants completed high school |
| Representation from 6 geographically bounded local Elementary Schools | Participants attended 5 of the local elementary schools |
| % involved in Extra-Curricular Activities | 100% |
| Earned a Bachelor's Degree or higher | 4 |
| Served in the Military | 5 |

| | |
|--|--------------|
| Currently Employed | 100% |
| Finished High School in top 20% of Class | At least 50% |
| Were part of Sibling Groups who attended same District | 100% |

The following table indicates some of the common results of the initial coding phase.

Table 2

Concepts from Initial Open Coding

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| TIME | Before school, After School, Before I got to High School, Evenings, Between classes, back then, at that time, all along, to go to college, while getting ready for graduation, after high school, on weekends, other out of school times |
| PLACE | In classes or classrooms, specific subjects, extra-curricular activities in or outside of regular school time, in the community, in the State, around the U.S., other countries, family homes, neighborhood streets, at the high school, in clubs or on sports teams, parades, pep rallies, MidEvil Festival, Vietnam |
| SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS | family, friends, with teachers, with classmates or cohort members, with sibling groups, with adults in other professions, with the business community, with other civic leaders and organizations, with faith-based organizations, with the U.S. military |

In the second phase of coding, the author reviewed the data within each commonplace for categories and connections between terms used in the individual narratives. This process is similar to what Pamela E. Brott and Jane Myers (1999) referred to as axial coding. Several categories emerge within each commonplace. Some of the key categories are reflected in the next table. The remainder of the discussion section addresses the research questions and alignment of the three commonplaces in relationship to other themes that emerged through the stories that were shared.

TABLE 3

Categories within the 3 Commonplaces

| | |
|-------|--|
| TIME | <p>References to various times of day for school</p> <p>Before and After school Time</p> <p>Prior to high school age/matriculation</p> <p>Times outside of weekdays when activities occurred</p> <p>Connections between time they were in high school and today</p> <p>Differences in community and experiences of students</p> <p>Differences in relationship between schools and families</p> |
| PLACE | <p>In School Spaces</p> <p>Classes</p> <p>Physical spaces in the building</p> <p>Spaces related to extra-curricular activities</p> <p>Community Spaces</p> <p>Recreational</p> <p>Supportive/ Gathering Spaces</p> <p>Theaters, Home, Church, Library)</p> <p>Geographic Spaces</p> <p>Up the hill</p> <p>Down the hill</p> <p>Streets/ Addresses</p> <p>Space in the outside world</p> <p>Other countries (Spain, Europe, Vietnam War)</p> <p>Suburban schools</p> <p>Future spaces</p> <p>College</p> <p>Jobs/Careers</p> <p>Family/Home</p> <p>Military</p> |

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| | |
| SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS | The role of the community The role of familial relationships The relationship with school personnel Relationships with peers Self In Relationships to Others |

Common Factors to Academic Success Identified through Personal Narratives

Full Community Support. The reflections from all of the participants in this study suggest their belief that the community they lived in was an active part of their education process and successful high school completion. The community at-large appears to have provided support in both tangible and intangible ways, from the provision of valuable resources to supporting education activities, to providing motivation for students to participate in school and community activities and leadership, to just coming out as a physical presence of support.

Several participants noted the role that the community played in providing finances that ultimately supported school activities. Many of the reflections alluded to the numbers of tickets community members purchased to local school events, including theater productions, sporting events, and band and orchestra performances. Participants often referred to their being a “full house” at many of the productions.

One person noted that “The businessmen supported our sports programs, and we had a great football and basketball team, the guys that

played on these teams went off to college on scholarships. I mean people supported us.”

One participant noted that when she was performing in a school play- a local beautician did her hair at no cost, so that she could have the hair styled she felt was most suited to her part. She further indicated that the local beautician also maintained her hair throughout the production. This participant also reflected on the fact that “I mean, my gosh, you could not go to one production and it wasn’t a packed house...I mean every little thing, even speech meets...You were out there and you had parents and other people with signs and stuff, even at a speech meet.”

Another participant also pointed out that some of the local businesses sponsored activities at the high school and in the community so that students were able to explore some of their interests while still in high school and gain and excel in the skills needed for success after high school. Recollections suggested that local sport teams were sponsored by the community for younger students and, that students could take classes at the local libraries or churches that also helped them to build their skills.

Another participant noted that local businesses also provided resources to purchase materials and supplies at the high school level - some through the provision of direct services and resources, in addition to ticket and refreshment purchases at school based events. One participant reported “We would be sold out, because of our plays. We would be sold out and have to do all kinds

of things to accommodate the community when they came to the plays.”

Another noted “So far as the community being supportive, people donated instruments, they gave back to the school; we had athletes come to our school to give talks, professional people who came back to talk to us about nursing and everything. It was really a community supported school at that time.”

Another person commented “Whenever there was a souvenir book for a school event, then you would see ads from all of the local businesses in the community, big and small, in support of the school.” One participant also noted, “People were very proactive...it was part of the culture. From the time we moved into that community there was a strong sense of school and community pride.”

Many participants reflected on the emotional support the community provided to high school students which they note encouraged, motivated and challenged them. Several of the participants reflected on the parades that often featured performances from their high school band, which were always well attended. Participants noted that this made them feel that the community thought they were the best. At least in the eyes of these individuals they felt very supported. One participant’s reflection highlighted how “People came from all around to watch our plays. That was like being on Broadway.”

Another noted “For the most part, it was about achievement and pride and we felt we could achieve anyway, because the community made us feel that way, definitely!”

The participants used several terms to describe the community. Many of them referred to groups of neighborhoods, that surrounded specific elementary schools or groups of streets bounded by specific major streets or landmarks, such as a large neighborhood park. They also referenced business people and places, specific job titles and public officials as being part of the neighborhood. Several commented on their impression that their community included people of mixed incomes and varied economic statuses as related to their choice of profession. One person stated “You saw teachers and firemen and policemen living in that neighborhood. Everybody lived in the neighborhood; it wasn’t like this was the neighborhood they moved up to.” This comment implies that people chose to reside in this neighborhood because they recognized and valued the economic diversity in the community. Others also indicated that school staff lived in the community as well.

For these participants, representatives of the community were not always people they knew personally, but people who seemed to take interest in them because they were students in the community. They also noted that these community members would ask them why they were not in school during school hours if they saw them on the street. One participant noted. “Everybody knew your name; they knew who you were, and what class you were supposed to be in at certain times. I mean you could go down to the local restaurant and someone there would say ‘wait a minute, hold up, lunch is over, you guys get back to school.’” They would also ask students about events going on in school, which seemed to keep students on their toes while

giving them a sense that school was important and that they represented their communities. One person's reflection indicated "And I think the community had a sense of well-being and confidence because of what they knew was being produced from their schools." The respondents suggested that community members felt a sense that their success was tied to the "success of the community." Several reflections identified the emotional and moral support the participants felt the community provided. The concept of performing for "full houses", "packed audiences", "a full stadium" etc. came up multiple times from the participants. In addition, people noted that the community would provide additional recognition to students when they saw them on the streets sometimes in their respective uniforms.

Several reflections suggested that when community members recognized students who had achieved specific accolades, they would acknowledge them in other settings. One participant noted that the school superintendent spoke to him in a public setting once, after he has received a specific academic award at school. This participant noted that this recognition made him feel that this person appreciated him and it motivated him to continue to uphold the same standard for himself. Another participant noted that as a result of her interest in student government- a local politician invited her to attend City Council with other advisory board members. Moreover, this individual attributes her activism in civic government 30 years later to some of the encouragement and support she received from this community member during her high school career.

The sense of community that participants discussed seems to reflect the entire community, including individuals who were not African American. Some participants noted that the business owners and individual residents, who may no longer have had children in the school system, including the elderly, also supported them. An individual illustrates this point in regards to one of his elderly White neighbors. He reported that one of his elderly White neighbors used to tell him “you are probably one of the nicest guys, but not only nice, but you are smart, very smart.” This woman found out the participant liked piano and gave him piano lessons for no cost. This relationship began with him shoveling her snow and raking her leaves as a simple way to help his neighbors because “we helped each other back in the day because that was just the way the community was, even though we knew there was a line between black and white.” This sense of community and connectedness was a factor that participants attribute to their successful high school graduation.

Positive Caring Adults. Another key component of the community according to the reflections of those in this study was the important role that “my friend’s parents” played in their academic engagement and success. Several alluded to the need to make those parents proud, in addition to their own. They also often referenced the fact that sometimes these other individuals provided support and assistance to them, even if their own parents were not available. This was in the form of rides, cheering for them at extra-curricular and other recognition events when their own parents could not be present, and also showing concern about the student’s academic performance. Participants

reflected on doing homework at each other's homes, because homework was valued in those homes as well. One participant noted that "everybody did their homework because that was expected" and that "everyone did their homework and then went outside or did whatever else". This participant noted that those who did not were known as slackers and "no one wanted to be thought of as one of those, by everyone else".

One participant summed up many of the responses to the important role of adults in the community played in influencing the education attainment of students at the high school by noting that "they challenged us". His perception that the presence and engagement of adults in the community did not just reward students but set standards for performance and achievement that the students adopted because it was "expected". All of the participants reflected on the fact that they felt motivated to succeed from being in a community where high school graduation was an expectation, and not an option. Participants pointed out on several occasions that even if there were times that their families may have not been their strongest supporters or when they were experiencing difficulties relating to their parents for a variety of reasons, the support of other adults in the community was there - egging them on to graduation. Several of the reflections also noted participants' belief that students in high school in the same city suffer today, because the community does not provide anything near the level of support they received in high school, again due to a variety of reasons, which they all acknowledged.

In addition to the role of a highly engaged community and the importance of other people's parents, every participant felt that their expectations for high school graduation were set at home, first. Comments such as those listed below further illustrate the reflections that reinforce this intrinsic respect and expectation for high school success:

"Graduation was always the expectation"

"I never questioned whether I would graduate or not"

"It [graduation] was never an option"

"My parents would have had it no other way"

"My mama would not have it [failure to graduate]"

"I would have had trouble to face at home if I did not graduate"

Every participant indicated that they entered high school with the expectation to graduate. The participants also agreed that the role of the school was to help them graduate, not to instill in them the "value" for education. In addition, the reflections indicated that extended families were an important part of reinforcing this message. Many of them referenced the expectations of aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, and cousins setting the expectation for graduation for them, and even younger siblings. Some referenced the fact that others in the family had successfully graduated from high school and the expectation was then set for them often before 9th grade.

Several participants also recalled their expectations as youth that there would be penalties for failing to graduate.

These penalties included “not getting a good job”, “not going to college”, and even the threat of physical discipline. One participant noted,

So part of being a good example was not getting pregnant, graduating from school, not getting strung out on drugs or alcohol. I mean, these were all expectations. And not just from your parents, but also your extended family and the neighborhood. Be a good girl and do the right thing. It was an expectation, especially if you were going to be a leader or if you wanted to go to college, or graduate. You had to act a certain way.

Several participants noted that while these expectations were set at home, there were times that due to difficult family situations that occurred that caused physical or emotional disconnects in their homes, they received reinforcement of these values from others in the community or in the school. Some participants indicated that either due to death, substance abuse, misaligned expectations between themselves and their parents, needs for parents to work more in order to survive, etc., they did not always feel fully supported at home. However, every participant noted that it was a special adult, oftentimes in the school but sometimes in the community, who helped them stay connected to their intrinsic expectation that they would graduate from high school.

One individual noted that in “9th grade, my stepfather died and then things changed at home due to a whole lot of issues”. He further noted that he became disengaged in school and one of his teachers noticed and basically took him under his wing, until he “got himself back on track”. Another participant noted “although I had an awful family life and things were terrible at home”, a teacher in school allowed students to have a bible study at their request, and then a community resident allowed them to move the program to her home after it outgrew the classroom. This participant felt that the support from this teacher, showing interest in her, kept her motivated to succeed. In this case, while the participant felt disconnected from her family, she noted that her mother handled challenges with teachers at school and even continued to “punish” her when she had a struggle with a teacher there, which shows that her parents stayed engaged in her academic success.

There were countless reflections of parents, asking about homework, helping with homework, attending parent conferences, “going up to the school”, “helping fix relationships with teachers that had gone awry”, and supporting them in events and activities that suggest that for these students, family support and expectations both motivated them and increased their likelihood to succeed.

Evidence of Internal Motivation. An interesting finding from several of the reflections was that many participants saw their success as motivated not only from their families, the community, and their teachers but also from themselves? In fact, several indicated that they felt their actions were

primarily driven by their expectations for themselves. While several mentioned the support an additional motivation they received from others, many felt certain that they entered high school guided by their own level of motivation, and feeling that success was inevitable. In fact, several noted that failure “was never an option they considered”.

One participant shared a reflection of a point between her junior and senior year when she found out she was “short one English credit to graduate.” She indicated feeling appalled that the teachers had not told her ahead of time that this was a pending barrier to her success, “since they knew I was planning to go to college.” This participant shared how she saved her money and enrolled in a night school class throughout her senior year “with adults who were working on their GED’s or diplomas” to ensure that she would meet the graduation requirements by the end of the school year. This participant met her personal goals and graduated on time and admits, feeling “proud” about her accomplishment and ability to stick to her personal goal.

Several other participants noted that they were compelled to succeed in high school because they were motivated by the goals they hoped to obtain for themselves “after high school.” For some this was going to college, others getting a “good job” and for still others it was a military career of their choice. One participant indicated that her goal was “to get married” but she wanted to finish high school first. Ironically, this individual went on to earn several post-secondary degrees. Their personal reflections indicate that they often selected activities to engage in during high school based on their own plans

for their future. One participant was very interested in the military and so joined ROTC in 10th grade. This individual moved up several ranks before finishing high school and earned additional recognition from the U.S. government for his efforts. While he admits turning down a scholarship to attend military school in 11th grade because he was determined to complete high school, this person did spend several years in the U.S. military.

However, while adults in this study narrated the expectation for success was set at home as was the expectation that their schools were there to help them, several participants noted that the latter expectation sometimes was challenged. When there were times they felt disconnected from school, it was often because of a difficult and non-productive relationship with a teacher. One participant noted that one of her instructors “liked boys better”. This person reflected on feeling disheartened because the teacher did not pay the girls any attention. This female respondent noted that she succeeded in the class but she was disheartened. Another participant noted she had a struggle with an instructor that lasted a whole year, and even though her parents interceded she felt the year was horrible because the teacher picked on her and then “I was put on punishment at home, all year”. Some participants noted struggles in specific courses and often referred to feeling that for some reason their teacher did not care and did not help them. Joel Spring (1998, p.145) found some indication in his research from school administrators in urban districts with high African American populations, that in these districts teachers sometimes possess personal value systems that lead to disconnects for

students. Some of the participants emphasized that because they were motivated to succeed, they persevered, but even in their recollections, years later, there is evidence they still struggled with those situations.

Negative Responses from Educators as a Source of Motivation. For two participants in particular, they were compelled to succeed by teacher indifference. One participant noted that once he realized he was in a lower track and that his “A was not equal to the A a Caucasian student got in his classes”, he was motivated to reach the higher track and he did. This individual noted that since he was an athlete, the teachers never thought of him as “smart”. This same student later realized a National Honor Society existed. He told a peer “I am going to get in that” and a year later, he did. He said others were surprised but for him, “I had to show those teachers that I could”.

Another respondent noted disappointment after competing in an event at a local suburban high school and observing “Their school was nicer than ours and they had stuff like AP classes that we did not.” She noted feeling disheartened that the adults at her school were not trying to offer them what other schools had. For this respondent a European study abroad opportunity opened her eyes to the fact that “they were learning more over there than we were, and they learned about what was going on in the world and we did not”. This same individual returned to her home school and then entered vocational classes that she hoped would prepare her to work her way through college. Unfortunately, she experienced an enhanced feeling of disappointment when

she realized that teachers in this program did not think the students were smart enough for college and did not try to prepare them for college. This student did later attend college, but notes her remaining time in high school was sometimes frustrating because she felt her instructors did not really care about the future she had planned for herself.

Peer Relationships. Healthy competition from peer groups as a motivation for graduation from high school was another interesting theme that arose in this analysis. Several participants indicated that the support they received from their peer groups in various forms was instrumental to their success. This important social network motivated students to succeed, in most cases in a variety of ways. In addition to the respondent who moved himself up along a tracking system to show teachers that he could handle the more rigorous courses, there is evidence that showing his peers his academic ability was also a source of motivation. Other respondents received support from their peers in their effort to achieve academically. Some noted that other peers helped them when they struggled with a particular subject. One noted that siblings as peers also provided tutorial support and helped with specific subject areas.

Peers groups were also a source of information and emotional support, providing a sense of belonging that encouraged people to stay engaged in school. Participants shared many stories of how their high school experience revolved around what they were able to accomplish through the support of their peers. One individual noted, "The fact that I paid the money and I took

the extra time to take this course with one of my other friends and ended up successful made me feel great.” In this instance that fact that her friends shared this same experience with her, added to her sense of satisfaction, even though she had to take a night school course.

Another noted, “And we had friends who just said ‘ok you are not doing well in that so let’s figure out why.’” Participants narrated extended peer networks. As one participant reported, “I had friends who were having an awful home life and not only were we their friends, but then their siblings became like our own and would hang out with us because we were nurturers and caregivers and comedians.”

An additional reflection shows other ways that peers provided support to each other. When it came to getting ready for college this individual noted, “everybody was there, even when we were going through the SAT’s and PSAT’s. People would say ‘let’s study, let’s do this, what do you mean you did not do your essay yet?’” This participant also noted, “Sometimes you supported people even when you did not know them that well but that is just what we did.” She further notes, “We motivated each other to do our best. My friends were motivated and I was motivated.”

One participant found her niche in high school through participation in a school based activity when she served on student government. She was able to support her peers and build relationships with them through serving as their liaison with the school board and administration where she fought to earn

extra privileges for her peers. She was later given the opportunity to join an outside community advisory board and work for the larger community. She recalls:

So I was really into the politics of the school. Getting different things for the students like extended hours in the lounge was important since they wanted extended time in the afternoon and after school. Another young lady and I presented the petition to the principal. We always did everything through the proper channels and the principal felt “Oh, Jesus” when he saw us coming. We would get letters of support from teachers and we did everything by the book because we wanted to win. Soon he would say “O.K just tell me what you want for your classmates now and I will take it to the Board.”

Another participant commented on how a teacher opened the classroom for the students to form a Christian youth group, because it was something they were interested. She also notes that as their group of peers grew, a family in the community opened up their home to them so they could have a space to go and hold their club after school.

Peer networks also appear to be fostered by neighborhood connections. The reflections of the participants suggest that friendships that existed in high school continued throughout their lives. It is also noted that several of these friendships began prior to high school and were based on where people lived.

An individual noted “some lived up the hill and some lived down the hill”. One participant notes “I have friends today because we were friends in high school.” Another notes “those in my clique, we had plans, ideas about where our lives were going to go.”

The strength of peer networks was also evident in the first segment of the interviews conducted with participants. In reflecting upon the selection of participants, normally at each interview individuals would tell me about others from the school that they were currently in relationship that “I should talk to.” Each would begin by identifying others who worked with them or they were involved with socially, or who were immediate or extended family members. One participant had 5 individual colleagues in the Post Office who he knew graduated from his high school. In one instance, a participant called a student a little younger than himself and invited her to join our conversation. She took a detour from her grocery shopping and joined us within ten minutes. This individual’s immediate response suggests further just how strong these peer networks were and, frequently, how much they have been sustained.

Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities. Engagement in extra-curricular activities was commonly referred to as a form of motivation and support for the participants during their high school years. According to many of the reflections shared in this study, extra-curricular activities were the basis of positive peer relationships, provided opportunities for students to develop their personal interests and strengths, and served to connect students to the school, broader community and the world.

Several participants noted that many of their friends were in the groups, clubs and activities they were and that they “hung out with” these peers. Several also indicated that there were some expectations that members would hang out within their groups as formed by membership in these activities. Students often associated with peers based on these memberships. Memberships and identities were established, as in “you are in the band,” which positioned a student in relationship with others, stemming from this activity. Some even referenced hanging out with groups that their peers or older siblings were a part of as an additional level of social relationship for themselves that sometimes yielded extra privileges, such as “sitting on the stage” or attending certain events. Some also noted that peers working together in social clubs were able to get policy changes in the school and in the community, and new organizations, such as Campus Life, started on campus. One participant noted “we formed a little youth group in the school because we wanted a good environment to pray in school.”

Other participants noted that involvement in extracurricular activities such as student council, student senate, exchange programs and the mock trial and speech team helped form some of their future allegiances and career interests. Participation in some of these activities provided additional recognition and opportunities to participate in other community activities while the individuals were yet in high school. One person’s engagement in the student council ultimately led to her participation in an exchange program to Spain. She learned about the program and was supported in her application

process by a community member who had encouraged her to engage in a local neighborhood advisory board.

Another role that participation in extracurricular activities played was that it gave students the opportunity to discover and build upon their natural talents. Theater, band, orchestra, rhythm teens, and pit orchestra were some of the programs mentioned that gave the participants a social outlet and also an opportunity to gain recognition through competitions and performances. Participation in these events encouraged the individuals to remain engaged in school and to strive for continued perfection if only to hear the community and fellow students cheer for them in recognition of the claim and pride they brought to the school. Academics were connected to these activities because many noted that grades had to be maintained and homework done “then you did everything else.”

One participant reported that she discovered her talent for singing in an English class when the teacher “stood up and applauded when I finished my report.” The participant noted that from that point on she sang in whatever projects and classes she could because she “thought she must be pretty good at it.” This individual also noted that she was very shy and had a limited social presence until she decided to use her singing in theater, which also brought much recognition to the school and was very well supported by the community. She ended up having the lead in several school plays and musicals and joining the choir, ultimately widening her peer group and building some skills that led her to major in Theater and Education, in college. This

individual also noted that due to older siblings who engaged in some of these same activities she felt more acceptance, even as an underclassman.

Importance of School Pride. A sense of the importance of peer groups is also reflected in perceptions about the importance of school pride for these participants. All of the participants in this study believed that there was a strong sense of belonging and shared pride for their school and community amongst the students and even adults in the community. While several noted “we did not always get along”, there was clear recognition by every participant that the school stood together. Two adults who graduated almost 10 years apart referenced a point 27 years ago when a local father murdered his three sons and the impact that had on all of the students in the district. They both noted “how hurt people were” and “how sad” because the brothers were in elementary, middle and high school. There was a sense that the schools had all lost something important and each youth was listed in the high school year book that he would have graduated with.

All of the participants noted there was allegiance to the school mascot and many actually quoted some of the fight songs or phrases during their recordings. They indicated that their school earned recognition for sports, band, orchestra, and academic arenas, such as mock trial, or speech and debate team. Participant’s reflected upon pep rallies, home coming games and parades, football and basketball games and other events as rallying points for students, both during and after the school day. Participants expressed their pleasure with the way the school came together around these

types of events. One participant noted “that there was never a time when there was not a sense of community and pride in the school.” Several others echoed this same sentiment. One also noted “we used to fight together; it was us against them (surrounding cities and high schools).” Several also noted that these allegiances began before students matriculated to the high school, because the community supported these activities and younger students were exposed before they were actually old enough to participate.

Post Secondary options (college, war/military, career). The desire to be prepared to meet their future goals appeared to serve as a motivator to student success and high school graduation. Many participants noted that they knew when they entered high school that they would need to graduate to meet their next aspirations. Participants also noted that there were various influences on these aspirations including parents, families, community people and school staff, but that they held these aspirations dear throughout their high school career. These aspirations led students to select specific courses of study, extra course work or opportunities, and to take advantage of additional opportunities to move ahead. For example, one participant noted that she switched to vocational classes in her junior year because her “father told her there would be no money for college and that he did not know anything about loans so she would have to work her way through school.”

Another participant noted that he stayed in ROTC because he knew he wanted to go to the military and because his parents would not let him play sports, which was something else he wanted to do. He ended up playing

basketball in the military. Yet another participant reflected on the fact that he “hung with the good people and made good grades” because he knew he was going to go to college. This individual noted that he got derailed in 11th grade by “the other crowd and did some bad stuff” but that he re-focused in 12th grade, with the help of some school personnel since his mother was not available to him at that time.

Limited Support for Post Secondary Success. Several participants noted that they took college prep classes, or made specific course selections based on their post-secondary plans. While many reflected on their plans for college, however, several alluded to the fact that they struggled to meet some of their post-secondary goals because they were not properly prepared in high school, to navigate those processes. One participant noted that she realized after studying abroad- that her high school teachers “ were not teaching us what the European students were learning. They learned more about world history and knew more about the war than we did. They did not talk about the war in [our] school.” This comment is also ironic because this study revealed that many of the participants were impacted by the war, as several were drafted and others volunteered to serve. One participant noted that “No matter if I wanted to go to college or not, I knew I would be drafted in the lottery, and because I was a Black Man, I was going to Vietnam. Not Germany or something, that would not be an option; it would be Vietnam for me.”

Another participant noted “that I did not realize until I went to college that I was not prepared.” This individual attended several schools and finished her

Bachelor's later in life after she was a wife with two small children. She expressed concern that she was not adequately prepared to manage the cost of higher education and also found the work a bit more challenging than she was led to believe it would be.

One participant noted that he wished he had taken more science courses in high school so that he could have pursued his early interest in chemistry in college, once he left the military. Another reflected on the fact that she got through a difficult math class "But it made me not want to take math in college, which I should have done because actually, I am very good at accounting. And you have to have those basic math courses to get to accounting and statistics. And if I had had to suffer through, I would have been OK." This individual later noted, "But because we were not told that a final English course was required for graduation, which I thought 'How can that have possibly have happened that I made it all the way to my senior year and would be short a class that I needed to go to college? That was crazy to me. I was a little upset about that."

Impact of Vietnam War on High School Experience. Each participant who attended the target high school during the 1970's reflected upon the impact of the Vietnam War on their high school experience as it relates to their perception of post-secondary opportunities and future planning. The reality of the draft lottery in the early to mid-1970's meant that the male students anticipated serving in the military prior to ever attending college, if at all. One participant noted, "For Black men that meant going to Vietnam! We did not

get sent to other European countries once we were drafted, Vietnam was a definite.” He described the Draft Lottery system that the young men faced, which was based on birthdates. In his case, his birthday was called, as was several of his classmates over the duration of the War.

Other male participants from this era were drafted as well and they also indicated that they anticipated that the draft would impact them as it did many of their peers. While all of the male participants indicated that their plan was always to graduate from high school first, which they accomplished, there was not much effort from the school staff on planning for their post secondary options, post-war. In fact, many of them resided in foreign countries or other states several years after their tour of duty ended.

For male students who graduated in the 1980’s, several of them also joined the military, although not under the auspices of a draft, but under an expectation that the military would provide them experience and opportunities, including an opportunity to go to college. One participant who attended in the latter part of the 1970’s and graduated in 1981, indicated that he was in the first class of Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) at the high school. This curriculum allowed students to earn various ranks in the Reserves prior to high school graduation that prepared them to enter the military at a higher rank post-graduation, if they chose the option. Students wore military uniforms to school on selected days and interacted with military recruiters throughout their high school career. This participant noted that he was offered a military scholarship in his junior year, which he turned down

“because my parents expected me to graduate from high school and I wanted to graduate.” This individual opted to attend college after high school and remained in the Reserves for several years after high school.

Another participant noted serving in the Gulf War, post high school graduation. This individual’s reflection illustrates another way that the military impacted students who graduated from this high school. This student noted that “I came back from the war ‘messed up’.” He ultimately had to receive supportive services in the community and between that and his faith in God, his life is currently on track and he is pursuing his Master’s Degree today. In his reflection, he suggests “that the Wars had a huge impact on the lives of many men from this community” and that “people rarely talk about it and many of the men who survived the wars never get helped.” He also identified the fact that many families were impacted by the absence and/or loss of male family members and later female family members, which left many students from this community dealing with the war and school, as well as the impact of the war on their post secondary options.

Several of the female participants also reflected on the impact of the Vietnam War in their inquiries as well. Several noted the fact that the knowledge that many of their male peers would go off to war after graduation was a reality that was rarely discussed during high school. One participant noted “at that time, I did not care about Vietnam other than I did not want my friends to go and I knew some people did not come home, but those guys were a little older than I was and the war was winding down.” Others noted

they had friends and family members who were drafted or who voluntarily enlisted. One male participant indicated that “I knew who I was going to marry when I graduated.” He married his high school sweetheart after graduation and then he was off to serve and she was left in the City until he was reassigned after the war.

The reflection of another female participant supports the finding that while the Vietnam War was going on, it was not a topic of discussion at the school. This participant notes:

When I went to Spain, and I found out those kids by age 16 were more politically savvy than I was. It made me come home and see who was Richard Nixon and what the heck was he doing to our country and what Vietnam was all about. I did not really care what the War was about. We did see things on television, and at my school they were not protesting it and guys were still going off to the Vietnam War.

This same participant noted that this exchange experience made her want to know more about the War and what was happening to her peers, but her school was not the impetus for that quest for knowledge; it was about going across the world and looking at things from an international perspective. The findings suggest that the Vietnam War did not have an immediate negative impact on their high school experience, specifically during the 1970's. Another participant noted, “It was a caring environment. I was very fortunate

to grow up in the times that I did, even though the Vietnam War was going on and it was still a lot of unrest in the country, but the music was powerful and the messages were so clear, and even in the love songs it was really not about negativity but about joining together. So I think it was the culture of the time and how everything really fit together.”

Connection with the Outside World. The participant reflections suggest that while their high school experiences centered on their community, they were aware of and engaged with organizations, schools and students across the country and across the nation. Participants indicated that they regularly competed against other schools across the State and interacted with other students as they engaged in music and sports performances across the country. One individual was an exchange student in Spain. The senior classes took trips to London and one year the honors class went camping and hiking.

One participant who discussed the camping trips noted “these little social things help to push us to thinking about what next year would be like”. Other participants noted that the band traveled across the State and visited Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the country. Another noted that they performed successful drama productions including “A Raisin in the Sun” at nearby suburban schools and at a “local Jewish Center”. This participant also commented about a local group of vocalists and musicians, “the Rhythm Teens group really made their mark, they traveled all over the place.”

Participant reflections also support the notion that students were constantly being prepared to engage with the outside world. In the words of one individual “Our 9th grade English teacher was particular about how we spoke because she said how you speak is the first think people see about you, the first idea they have about you and it had an impact on how they regarded you, so we always had to make sure we spoke clearly and used good English.” Another noted that she gleaned the idea from her parents that “My graduating from high school was just a stepping stone to the rest of my life. I was definitely going to get a good job, raise a family and have a future.” For several of the male students, serving in the military was inevitably a part of their future, and they were conscious that they were going to leave the city to do so. The participant who was in JROTC felt that the program was established to prepare him to “go into the military”, after high school.

Several participants also reflected on the fact that “they always knew they were going to go to college.” When they spoke about college, there was always a sentiment that college meant “going away”. Individuals indicated that they saw their high school experience as serving a role in preparing them to leave the community and /or city. One student noted “when I left to go to college, I realized the value of what I was in the midst of - a sense of entitlement that we as kids felt.”

Another participant discussed they he did not have a desire to go to college at that time so his principal set him up with a job at a local company. He said “He had the job set up for me and everything and my mother pulled

me right on out of that and took me right up to register for a local university. She said “I want you to go to college, if for nothing else but to have the experience.”

Sometimes these other opportunities for engagement made students question their own experience. One student noticed that other schools had Advanced Placement classes and hers did not. The following reflection further illustrates this point:

We were a part of a school association and all of the other schools were predominately white. When we would go there for Student Council events, we would see how elaborate their schools were and how much better the facilities were - they had new books, and all those fabulous things. I always used to wonder “why can’t our school be like that?” No one really had an explanation except that is just the way things are. I thought that was odd since we were a suburban school also.

Another commented on her perception that students in Spain were given a more solid curriculum than she was receiving at her school; specifically in the focus on government and world issues.

Commonalities in the Definition of Academic Success. The reflections of the adults in this study suggest that there are several components in the definition of academic success that involve the motivation of the student, the quality of the service delivery- i.e., the instructor, building the capacity of the student,

and achieving the desired outcomes. The findings suggest that a “need to feel successful” and to “successfully comprehend the materials” was important to participants.

One participant noted “I never doubted that I could succeed, that was never a question.” Reflections also supported the “need to be successful in my classes”. Some measured this success in terms of “getting A’s or B’s.” Another noted “I liked A’s and I always wanted to get them because I like the best and thought it was important to get them.” Another indicated the importance of successfully managing her own schedule and having a role in setting her own direction. She noted “I was excited about the notion of having classes, study time, activity time - but it was just this calendar and mapping all my times in and what I would be doing when and feeling very satisfied about that. That made me successful because it meant that I had a handle on what I was doing as a student.”

Another element of academic success that was evident in several of the reflections was the need for knowledge to be useful and the value of experiential learning in high school. Reflections on exchange opportunities, opportunities to participate in civic activities, participation in the traditional 12th Grade Shakespeare Festival, chess clubs, literacy clubs, and Junior Achievement, were given as samples of useful and fun learning opportunities they undertook while in high school. One participant summarizes this finding well when he noted “Taking what you are given and actually being able to use

that once you are out of school in order to contribute to society and hold your own. I think that is academic success.”

Several participants also related to the position they were in relation to others in their class and suggested that there was some “healthy competition” in their high school experience, motivated by others and from within themselves. Another component of academic success found in the narratives was that individuals felt that the quality and challenge of the work was important. One participant noted that good grades were rewarded through the receipt of money in her family so “there was a competition for getting good grades.” Another noted that “there were two or three of my friends and there was competition between us to get good grades.”

One participant reflected on the point early on in his high school career when he realized “an ‘A’ in his classes was not equivalent to the ‘A’ his white friend earned in his classes”. He then became determined to move up to the highest level of classes, which he accomplished. This individual believes that because he was an African American star basketball player, who “would most likely be drafted,” teachers did not expect him to want to be able to succeed or recognize how bright he was. He admits setting out to show them. Another participant indicated that once she was placed in Honors Classes it made her feel like “there is a certain level that I must meet—there is something expected of me. So doing the honors projects and actually getting additional recognition, that was academic success.” Academic recognition in terms of awards and getting inducted in the National Honor Society were a part of the

definition of academic success for several of the participants, as well as meeting the expectations of teachers and parents on their ability to succeed.

While the findings suggest that the composite definition of academic success was a combination of expectations and motivations from others, there was also a sense that some students did just what was expected as a means to an end. One participant said it this way:

I never doubted that I could succeed, that was just a given. I probably did not do my best at all things I kind of just did enough to do what I had to do, although I got a lot of 'A's' and 'B's' and I was in honors. But, I probably did not push myself because I did not like school. So I just did enough to do good in school, but I probably could have done better.

Several students alluded to the need to meet one's academic goals so they could participate in extra-curricular activities of their choice, including sports and avoid penalties from parents or negative reactions from other adults. Several participants noted that punishments from parents were a reality for poor academic performance. One also noted that her mom worked at the school "so I had to perform." Another noted "the teachers had relationships with our parents; I remember conversations on the phone... the teachers really cared."

The reflections of the participants in this study reflect a high degree of commonality in terms of what they attribute to their high school success. It

was interesting to talk to individuals who attended the school a decade or so apart and still find a high degree of correlation between their experiences and their perceptions of the importance of their high school success as tied to the success of their community. They all felt that there was a high level of support from the adults in the school, in their homes and families and in the community. Several expressed their belief that students in the community today do not receive the same level of support which they believe is a part of the challenge that is leading those students to struggle to succeed academically.

The importance of school as a space that encompassed before and after regular school hours, evening and weekends, both in the building and around the community and city, is another element these participants identified as critical to their success. For them, school was an extension of home, which was also an extension and reflection of their community. Their sense that people knew them -knew where they belonged and was vested in their being where they belonged provided a sense of security to these individuals. They had experiences that validated their worth to themselves and to other caring adults.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

“When I left to go to college, I realized the value of what I was in the midst of - a sense of entitlement that we as kids felt.”—African American high school graduate

The two key questions this study examined concerned the experiences of the African American adults who were educated in the same predominately African American Midwestern public school district over a 20-year period. In particular, the researcher was interested in what factors African American adults, having successfully graduated from high school, perceive as critical to their academic success and lifelong learning.

A key shared experience amongst the participants in this study refutes information in the review of the literature that informs this research because it is clear that for these participants their expectations for successful high school

graduation was established in their homes prior to their high school attendance. Oftentimes researchers cite differences in the home environments of African- American students as the cause for their underachievement. Supporters of this philosophy include Bernstein (1971), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), and Coleman in 1966. Studies that determined that African American homes were not enriched family environments had their roots in this era, primarily citing deficiencies in African American parent values as a likely cause for the achievement gap.

Participants attending school at about the same time that this work was generated reveal another side to family and community involvement in students' learning and academic success. While two males were raised in single parent female-headed households, both due to a parent being deceased, they still cited examples of solid relationships with other adults including uncles, neighbors and school staff who provided support to them at various stages in their high school career. There are also several suggestions that the community saw all of the high school students as their own and acted as parents to provide guidance and encouragement to the students as necessary. The community provided mentoring and opportunities for career exposure as well.

In addition to the value of expectations set by parents in the homes of these participants, extended family also played a role in setting expectations for these individuals in their adolescence. Participants' reflections suggest that aunts and uncles, grandparents, siblings and cousins played a role in

upholding this expectation for the families and community. Individuals noted that sometimes they were in the position of being examples for their younger siblings and younger cousins due to their role of being the eldest. By the same token, those who were in the role of a younger sibling or cousin were expected to follow the example of older family members, and this expectation included high school graduation. Several participants narrated that they oftentimes selected activities to participate in when they attended high school based on what they had seen other family and community members participate in as youngsters including sports, music and academic programs.

According to Lisa Delpit, the challenge with placing the emphasis on gaps in academic achievement as a result of negative teacher perceptions is that it assigns all of the power to teachers and presupposes that African American students do not contribute anything valuable to their learning experience (Wiggan, 2007, p.317). This work responds to teacher expectancy theory which further devalues the role of African—American students in their academic success. Another commonality found in this study is that these participants have felt that they were internally motivated to succeed upon entering high school, partially due to expectations that were assigned to them from their families and reinforced in the community but most importantly due to their internal motivation to succeed.

According to the literature review, in discovering the factors that exclude the African American student voice from school reform policy decisions in this country, it is important to underscore the reality that African American students

do, in fact, hold a positive value for academic success. The reflections of these participants show that they all were taken aback when questioned about when they first thought they could succeed and who made them feel that way. They all indicated that they entered high school with plans to successfully graduate in order to move on to the plans they each held for their own future. They also all suggested that they felt they had the ability and skills to achieve although some admitted that at different points in their high school career they may not have always tried their hardest, nor was their strongest effort always required to succeed. In addition the reflections indicate that some of the students sought various opportunities for healthy completion with academic performance, again based on their own motivation.

Communalism

In addition to internal motivation and family expectations, solid peer support and engagement in extra-curricular activities rose to the top of common success factors to high school graduation evidenced in the stories shared by the participants. This solid peer support appears to have thrived, particularly both inside and outside of the school building. This support extended in to recreation and other experiential learning settings, such as camp, local and State competition, and even night school. Not only did the peer support foster a sense of community among the students. It also increased their interdependence. This is similar to the phenomenon of communalism which emphasizes the interdependence of people as discussed in the literature review.

. The stories of the respondents suggest that interdependence was relevant in their high school experience. It is apparent that relationships formed in high school existed across their time in high school and oftentimes extended post high school. Several of the participants knew other classmates and were still in relationship with them 20 or 30 years post high school. Clearly, as students, these adults felt support and allegiance with their peers, in terms of achieving academic success.

It was very clear from the reflections of all of the participants that they felt pride in their individual accomplishments and also saw their accomplishments in the context of reflecting positively on their school as a whole. They viewed their efforts at showcasing their school in a positive manner as a way to exemplify the success and strength of their community as a whole. Every adult in this study attributed their enjoyment of and engagement with their high school experience to their involvement in extra-curricular activities. Not only did their engagement with school build their own self-confidence and in some cases raise their expectations for themselves, but they saw themselves as a part of a *legacy of success*, attending a school that had a reputation for excellence in academics, athletics and school pride. The reports of the Pep Rallies, Community Parades and overwhelming support for the school activities and accomplishments reflect their pride in this legacy. These participants saw themselves and their school in the context of a bigger world and had high expectations for the impact they would make as individuals in the world.

The literature review on school reform is in contrast to the communalism narrated by the participants. This literature shows that individualism and competition are styles of socialization and are apparent in mainstream school practices and pedagogy. Class rank systems, tracking, and school building rankings of proficiency scores by the state are examples of practices that reinforce the value of individualism and competition in schools. These practices existed according to the reflections of the participants and elicited varied responses in the students. While apparently not as predominant in their narratives of their education experience as their experience of verve and communalism, the participants were nonetheless exposed to competition, which is a component of mainstream socialization, in their education process. They were willing to engage in friendly competition with peers, competition in sports, performing arts and academic challenge with other schools. This was a critical part of their experience, a part that the community both encouraged and supported.

It appears that these participants were prepared to compete, within the context of communalism as a way to prepare them to accept the challenges of the bigger world of jobs, post secondary education and the military, with an ultimate underlying goal of being good American citizens. It appears to also suggest that the participants were driven by their perceptions of the legacy of their school and community, hence collective achievement was valued, which is consistent with communalism as a form of socialization.

Participants viewed their engagement in school related activities as a way to build relationships with others in the context of building a level of self-actualization at that stage of their lives. Many of the participants felt a sense of being “ready for the world” and not unprepared or incompetent. This sense of attainment and preparedness was solidified for most of them prior to high school graduation and they viewed their time in high school as the space that many of them said “prepared them for the rest of the world”. This opportunity to experience success and help others experience success seemed to be felt even more by the participants, which suggests that knowing that one comes from a generation of success increases individual student motivation to succeed.

The literature indicates that *verve* refers to the ability to manage multiple stimuli, i.e., multi-task (Tyler, Boykin, & Dillihunt, 2005). Clearly the participants saw high school as an opportunity to engage in extra-curricular activities which were an important part of their high school experience and in their positive youth development. It appears that the participants saw their engagement in multiple school based activities as a critical component of their high school career as it related to their development and option as viable adults. The importance of using one’s talents and engaging with other students to build each other’s skills was apparent in all of the narratives. None of the participants indicated that coursework or grades was their primary motivator for engagement in school; however, they all noted the importance of

maintaining a solid level of academic performance while managing to succeed in their extra-curricular activities and civic engagement opportunities, as well.

This perception of the importance of these other activities as a core part of self-development appeared to be aligned with the expectations of adults in the school, community and in their homes and extended families. Again the findings suggested that while academics were a priority in terms of meeting the expectations, they were motivated by the opportunity to engage in social activities with their peers and to earn recognition from others, as well as to reflect school and community pride. School was more than coursework – it was a space for coming together to accomplish things as a group, a class, a clique, or an entire building.

While the participants narrated extra-curricular activities as satisfying their desire for success and fulfillment outside the classroom, they also spoke about their classroom experience, including the influence of teacher expectations. Participants in this study clearly suggested that the instructors in their high school played critical roles in establishing students' level of engagement with their classes, their goals and high school in general. Several stories of instructors and other school staff providing support for the participants' interests and the development of their talents further illustrates this point. School staff provided social and emotional support, such as providing resources for a student who was experiencing difficulties at home to acknowledging individual student's assets and helping them to build on them.

Other reflections suggest that school staff helped students identify options for jobs and career exposure, even during high school.

The findings in this study are aligned with the work of Karen Teel (1998), who looked at alternative teaching strategies, focused on four key principles, and what impact these principles might have on the students' motivation over the course of each year of this study. The four strategies were Effort-based Grading, Increased Student Responsibility and Choice, Validation of Cultural Heritage, and Multiple Performance Opportunities. The findings in Teel's study suggested that the use of these strategies provided opportunities to build students' engagement in the learning process. The impact of these strategies, with the exception of effort based grading, by teachers, school staff, coaches, and mentors are reflected in the responses from the participants in this study.

For example, this study found stories of participants using their natural abilities in high school as a way to enhance their learning and personal growth, such as singing in class projects and involvement in extra-curricular activities. These narratives illustrate how multiple performance opportunities engaged the students and validated their cultural heritage. These activities, sometimes offered after school but also offered during the day, were an important part of their high school experience. As students, they were allowed to work together and support each other in class and around class projects and expectations. They were able to use their participation in activities and educational experiences as a way to build their civic responsibility and

illustrate their interconnectedness with their communities and their families.

The participants also had a sense that their academic performance was related to their choices in academic courses and extra-curricular activities.

They shared stories of applying themselves to meet the expectations of themselves, their instructors and family members.

These findings support the existence of these two principles of communalism and verve as relevant characteristics of African American cultural values that are predictive of academic success. Study findings suggest that when multiple opportunities for youth development and academic learning, evident in study findings on the presence of verve, and meaningful and culturally relevant experiences of community interdependence, which revealed the presence of *communalism*, are encouraged in the learning environment, there is likely to be a higher rate of academic success for African American students. The findings of this study suggest that these same two principles were strong contributors to the academic success of these African American participants.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

According to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), “cultural relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically.” (p. 476) The findings in this study support the notion in the literature review that suggests that African- American people and communities both value academic achievement and seek to succeed

academically while maintaining a positive sense of self. All of the participants reflected on the fact that the personal goals and internal motivation that they brought with them to school were supported in their high school education experiences. None of them identified a sense of having their cultural identities challenged. They felt that the support of their community and family values were congruent with the values in the school, for the most part. None of them identified a need to change their “inner selves” or replace what they had been taught about self esteem and expectations with anything new or different in high school. Even when they competed with students from other schools, or races across the State or the country, they never expressed a sense of feeling incompetent or inadequate due to their culture or their cultural values. The absence of this pressure resulted in them feeling self confident and adequate to meet the goals they set for themselves and those that were reinforced by adults in their community.

Critical race theory provides a perspective that suggests the relevance of culturally competent instructors and the integration of cultural themes into the education of all children (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings 1995). The findings in this study support the assertion that underpins this literature review in that it provides evidence for the contribution of a positive experience of cultural values on a student’s overall academic success. Participants clearly narrated a sense that their culture was indeed validated by their teachers, their peers, and their school. This appeared to enhance the achievement of positive outcomes in learning. Participants clearly felt a sense of shared values on the

part of their families and their instructors around academic success and the purpose of high school. The expectations they had for their futures were similar to that of their teachers. While some indicated that there were some missing pieces from their experience, such as clear directives and strategies for succeeding in post secondary opportunities, the information and support they received from instructors and the academic experiences they were afforded served to reinforce their cultural values.

As is suggested in the literature review in the work of Vanessa Sheared (1999), culturally relevant curriculum must be delivered by socially conscious and aware instructors. Findings in this analysis suggest that the participants' educational experiences in high school were enhanced because they had socially conscious and aware instructors. They were afforded a variety of experiences including participation in music and sports competitions as well as enrichment opportunities, often orchestrated by school to meet the interests of the students. The community and families also took on a role for providing resources and support to students in their individual and collective quests. Several participants underscored the availability of additional emotional or practical support when they needed it from their instructors. They clearly felt that their instructors shared some of their own life experiences or at least could relate to them, which likely prompted the interest of these educators and their competency in meeting the needs of students. Participants noted that teachers and school staff knew participants' parents, lived in the same neighborhoods, cared about students, and tried to provide a positive

environment for students. These points were narrated by participants, and they point to some of the concrete ways in which pedagogy was culturally relevant for participants in this study.

Connections to Adult Learning and Continuing Professional Education

According to the literature review Vanessa Sheared insists that “African American adults’ lived experiences are grounded in race, class, gender and other cultural factors that can contribute to their understanding of the process for producing knowledge” (1999, p. 44). As such the literature review further concludes that instructors and program planners must be willing to grow and change their own perspectives as they are influenced by their students, in order to ensure that the delivery of programs moves all of the participants forward. The findings in this study suggest that race, class, gender, communalism and verve are critical components of the lived education experience for these participants. The participants clearly attached their future goals and life expectations to their high school experiences and their family and community expectations for them as adolescents. While some of their goals were not crystal clear, as is this case with most adolescents, their belief in the value of high school success as a vehicle to their obtainment of desired status in society was clear.

Participants acknowledged that race was a factor in several capacities. They understood that the larger world had some different expectations for them because they were African American, but this did not seem to deter their

expectations to succeed, and in many cases, this understanding pushed them to strive more and to desire success. They were also aware that their success was a reflection on the strength of their community as a whole, which is further evidence of communalism. The community then also served as a catalyst to push these individuals to desire academic success and success in life. They saw examples of how to live, possible career options, and post-secondary options in their own communities. The dreams were set in high school, but their varied experiences in post-secondary and career choices further indicate a need for culturally relevant adult learning opportunities.

As noted in the literature review, Elice Rogers and Catherine Hansman (2004) suggest that effective teaching strategies for African Americans in an urban setting must promote social responsibility in the students in order to help them enhance their own quality of life (p. 26). These researchers further indicate that educators of African Americans adults should be reflective practitioners in that they must “recognize that the intentions of legislation” and other social programs “do not always match the reality of the lives of the participants at the margins, or the type of support available for programs to serve urban adults” (p. 25).

The findings of this study suggest that it was actually in post- high school experiences that these students began to experience more of a disconnect with their academic experiences. Some reported money problems, understanding the limitations of loan programs, challenges working and going to school, dysfunction brought on in newfound veteran status, and leaving

such a caring high school environment of adults and systems – each of these factors appeared to contribute to these newfound disconnects, which left several of them questioning their choices about whether they should have finished college or even higher education. Systems of support provided to these participants in post-secondary options appeared to lack the responsiveness to the challenges these individuals faced in this new space of disconnect and disenfranchisement. Some referred to this post-secondary experience as “culture shock” and others just said “we did not know.” This finding is consistent with this author’s initial suggestion in the literature review that this period of adult development after high school reveals the need for greater access to accurate information about various high quality options in education.

Summary

The findings suggest that for these participants, full community support, and expectations set by adults in the community and school supported their success. Positive caring adults, solid peer relationships, and engaged school staff were also identified as critical to their high school graduation. Overall, participants’ reflections and recommendations suggest that the question is not whether or not African—American students can succeed but whether such ingredients narrated by the participants as central to their high school experience exist in the current landscape of school as encountered by students. Some implications of these findings include revisiting the current arrangement of school offerings to ensure that academic programming during

and after school is culturally responsive to the traditions of communalism and verve in the African American community. To get to this point of structural change, this study suggests the need for an assessment of the will of adults and the school system to meet the identified needs of the students and to be truly willing to implement creative and responsive solutions to engender the kind of academic success evident in the narratives of student participants.

The findings in this study are aligned with the work of Sankofa, Hurley, Allen, & Boykin (2005) and Tyler, Boykin, and Dillihunt (2005) as they contribute to the framework of this study in terms of their support of the role of the African American cultural theme of communalism to African American student achievement. The experiences of African American students as narrated by study participants also suggest that students' perceptions and value for academic success are rooted in the connections to their culture (Wiggin, 2007). Research indicates opposing positions on the congruence of African—American culture with academic achievement - some say it is very congruent (Gloria Ladson-Billings, 2005) and others suggest that it is not (Ogbu, 2003).

In summary, study findings reveal two key contributing factors to academic success and lifelong learning as evident in the narratives of African American alumni educated in the same predominately African American Midwestern public school district over a 20-year period. The first of these factors is the rich tradition of communalism, of a sense of collective and legacy, something participants described themselves as “being in the midst of” and engendering in the a “sense of entitlement.” The second of these factors is

related to verve. Here the research expands on the notion of verve as multi-tasking (Tyler, Boykin, & Dillihunt, 2005), toward a recognition of the need for youth to be exposed to multiple opportunities focused on the development of the individual as a whole – creatively, spiritually, and academically. Study findings also support a body of research concerning culturally relevant pedagogy suggesting specific strategies and areas of focus that should be utilized in the education of African—American students of all ages, increasing their likelihood for success in the American education system (Sheared, 1999).

Implications for Future research

Several opportunities for future research are implicated through the analysis and discussion of the data collected in this study. Some of these implications are related to opportunities to enhance the methodology and others suggest additional research questions that if addressed, would contribute to this discussion and provide answers to some of the new questions that arose.

The target population responded to the request for participation in this study in an overwhelming manner. There were more volunteers for participation than detailed in the methodology. Many individuals recommended other individuals to participate. Several individuals responded via the online inquiry, to the extent that several had to be graciously turned away with appreciation for their willingness to help a fellow alumnus and tell the story of their school experience out of pride for their school and

community. This desire to support the work and “tell the story” suggests the opportunity to expand this methodology to include additional participants as well as individuals who graduated in the 1960’s and 1970’s based on multiple direct requests. In expression of their interest, several individuals began to tell their stories online which suggest that the opportunity to collect data via an online discussion could enhance the methodology and findings of this study.

In terms of recommendations for future research questions, several topics arose that would augment the field and provide additional understanding of the experiences the participants shared in this case study. One topic to further explore would be the impact of the Vietnam War on communities of color - long and short term. This researcher was amazed to learn of the impact of this War on the participants, particularly those who graduated in the 1970’s. There was a lot of discussion about friends going and not coming home, in addition to the impact on the post-secondary options for several of the participants. The initial review of the literature suggests demographic changes and economic decline in this community over the last 30-40 years; however, none of that review referenced the impact of the War. Instead the literature primarily focused on real estate losses, loss of business, and the change from being a pre-dominantly White community to a predominately African American community with inefficient government. It would be interesting to understand the impact of the War on the change from primarily two-parent households to female headed households.

In the findings, it is noted that several participants realized at some point in high school or not long after graduation, that the quality of education they received in high school may have been less than what other students across the country and nation received. Several also alluded to the fact that they may not have been properly prepared to succeed in higher education, both for the social challenges they would face as well as the academic challenges related to their expectations for college. This impacted everything from courses, or levels of rigor they should have taken in high school, to a better awareness of the financial burdens of higher education, and how to achieved real access. Additional research would need to be done to flesh out some of these topics in order to provide direction for current education planning and policymaking. In addition, this research could help assure that appropriate support systems exist in post-secondary education to assure retention of African American students.

Another recommended topic for future research would be to take an in-depth look at the relationship between academic ability and expectations for behavior. Several participants narrated that there are clear expectations from school staff that appear to link behavior with intellectual ability, which in some cases is positive if it sets expectations for students that they feel are important, but could lead to other unanticipated outcomes. Some individuals felt somewhat challenged with how to be “smart” and maintain independent identities in the face of some of these pressing expectations. One participant indicated living somewhat of a double life - between the “good” kids and doing

“bad stuff” with the “bad” kids, while keeping his grades up. Others admit some challenges waiting for adults to realize their potential because they were quiet, disengaged, or athletic - all of which are traits that can be cajoled into academic success, as suggested by the findings of this study. While the literature tends to address peer pressure, it does not seem to focus adequately on pressure from adults and how it manifests in student behaviors and self perception, and ultimately academic achievement. We want to educate students - not stress them out with our limiting and sometimes unrealistic expectations for adolescents.

Recommendations for Educators and Education Policy Makers

As noted in the literature review that frames this study, clearly where the findings from this study are congruent with the research, the task will then be to amplify the voices of African American students to position them to inform school reform efforts and policy making. First there is the need to further research to validate the findings from their stories through collecting more stories. This would allow for follow up questions. Second, it will require that the new knowledge be used to inform school reform efforts, policies and practices.

Clearly communalism achieved through the validation of culture and the presence of community support is evident in the narratives. This study underscores the influence of communalism as critical to the academic success of African American youth, and most likely adults. Given this, an

emphasis on communalism and youth development as it relates to verve must be placed high on the agenda for policy making and education reform efforts. Efforts to maintain and strengthen relationships between a community and its students, even those who choose to attend school outside of the community, must be prioritized as equal to or even more important than the utility of school accountability policies and practices. In addition, priority should also be given to efforts focused on the provision of extra-curricular and experiential learning options to students as a way to help them explore their own interests and meet their personal goals. Thus the question of “Why the Achievement Gap” could and should be modified to focus on what can the adults do build on the internal motivation within students and their natural gifts and abilities? We can stop focusing on how to “fix” people and cultures and instead examine the parts of the system that might contribute to youth development and learning and foster opportunities for communalism and verve. Educators might look inward at their own motivation to address questions beyond academics and look further into the realm of relationships and positive youth development. Questions such as “Do I have what it takes? Am I willing to give my all? Do I value the people and the culture enough to build on the assets, or are there any assets at all?” are useful in reforming the conditions of schooling in which African American students currently encounter.

Additionally, evident in the narratives of student participants is the role that economic well being and material supports play in contributing to academic success. Such supports include a social network within the

community, businesses that supported students and the schools, families that were able to care not only for their children but for another family's child, community traditions, a cohesive sense of neighborhood, and other conditions that reveal a community's resiliency. In this set of conditions, cultural cohesion could be preserved and academic success can be supported. As a participant noted, "You saw teachers and firemen and policemen living in that neighborhood" and another pointed out the availability of resources, donations, and support "at that time." Research recommendations include attending to the economic health and well being of neighborhoods toward creating the supports in which communalism and verve would thrive.

Limitations

As an African American woman who is a first generation college graduate, who also happens to be a product of American public school education, the main bias brought by this author to this research is the belief that African American people can and do value the experience of success in the current education system. This belief did not have a negative impact on the study because it was clear that every participant shared this same bias, as evidenced in their responses to the inquiry. Many were very adamant that there is no question that at least when they were in high school, education was valued. Several also indicated their belief that the value for academic success has not changed as much as the willingness of adults in the education system and in the community to make sure every African American student is given the opportunity to meet his or her greatest potential.

Another limitation of this study as mentioned earlier is the fact that African American adults were asked to reflect on experiences that occurred in their lives when they were high school students. Pachler and Daly (2009) note that some truth might be lost in individuals telling their own stories; however, the breadth of their experiences is still valid in the stories they are being invited to share. Several individuals were surprised at some of the things they did remember, and for most of the participants their stories flowed freely and sequentially. Others had even more recollections, after the taped interviews were complete and wanted to continue to reflect in general at the completion of the interviews, partially because a sense of camaraderie was established in the interview process, based on familiarity of values and commonalities of interests with the researcher. It was as if the process of recollecting identified commonalities and just “broke the ice”.

The researcher consistently asked probing questions to ensure that the participants were able to tell their own stories and explain what they meant. Some participants were more clearly processing some of their emotions about their experiences as they talked. Some sad memories and memories of disconnect seemed to bring sadness to people’s eyes.

The participants felt even greater validation of their own perceptions when findings on the commonalities were shared with them. There was sense that their perceptions were validated, and that the “good” feelings were “real”. Joel Spring also notes “The control of ideas and culture has been viewed as a source of power. What people know, what they believe in, and how they

interpret their world have an important effect on their choices, and consequently, their actions.” (1997, p. 406). It appears that for these participants, they felt a sense of empowerment as a result of the environment that was created for them, to develop and learn, in. They also shared somewhat of sadness around the fact that they all knew the experience for students today, is not the same as what they had. Perhaps participation in this study will spur them to some action?

Final Thoughts

This researcher conducted a related pilot study three years ago to experiment with this methodology and the strength of it when working with African American adults. That study provided an opportunity to test the validity of narrative inquiry as a methodology to identify evidence of communalism in the high school experience of several African American adults. According to Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, narrative inquiry as a methodology is useful when the focus is on the surrounding factors and forces that form the individual’s context” (2000). The reflections of the participants in this study on the role of communalism in their high school graduation validate the effectiveness of this methodology in understanding the value of reflection as a tool for gaining understanding. In addition, the work of Gloria Ladson- Billings also notes that her research was designed to “challenge us to reconsider what we mean by ‘good’ teaching, to look for it in some unlikely places, and to challenge those who suggest it can not be made available to all children” (1995, p). First in the pilot study and now in this more extensive work, this

research would concur with Ladson-Billings' and so might the participants in both studies.

Finally the findings in this work confirms Carter G. Woodson's profound acknowledgement that "It is merely a matter of common sense in approaching people through their environment in order to deal with conditions as they are (in this case were) rather than as you would like to see them or imagine they are" (Woodson, 1933, p.vii). The results from this qualitative analysis suggest that those on the road of culturally relevant teaching, because they understand that African Americans are socialized to value education, are closer to identifying effective solutions. Individuals possessing this understanding are more likely to successfully address the challenges facing public education in America. This is largely because they are starting from a clearer understanding of the presenting challenges - the actual diagnosis, and not a host of symptoms.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Template

1. Share some memories or stories of social and learning experiences from your high school years that you feel had a big impact on your graduating from high school. What was the impact? Why?
2. What factors motivated you to continue in high school until graduation?
3. What is your definition of academic success? Share a time or some times when you felt you could achieve academic success during your high school career.
4. Share some examples of situations that you experienced in high school when people made you feel that you were 'smart' or intelligent. What actions did they take? How did you feel? What if any behaviors did you change or employ as a result of that feeling?
5. What was the school like when you were there? Was there a sense of school pride or being connected to each other? Share some examples of when you felt there was or was not a sense of 'community' in the school.
6. Could you talk about any time you might have felt a sense of disconnect, if at all, with school – or a sense of struggle, either academically or socially?

7. Do you recall any ways that the community partnered with the school to help students achieve? Can you share some examples of when you felt the support of the community in your own high school experience?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX B
PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Personal justification for my interest in the project

As I began to think about the topic for my dissertation about a year or so into my coursework in the Urban Education program at Cleveland State University, I naturally focused on disconnects between my own experience and my experienced in higher education. I was all too often labeled a rebel or a person with radical views when I was in classroom settings and in professional settings, specifically when I worked for organizations that attempted to focus on solving the challenges Urban districts face in educating students of color. I often felt that information that was provided to identify solutions was often flawed because the root of the challenges was oftentimes rooted in personal judgments about people or incongruent with the cultural priorities of the target populations. I found it inconceivable that in America, entire cultures of people could have value systems that discounted the purpose or need for learning. I believe that even animals value learning because of its connection to basic survival. If the baby deer does not learn when it is best to cross the road he will not live to adulthood and thus will not continue the species. I believe the same holds true for squirrels, chipmunks, puppies, raccoons etc. None of these animals are higher in God's eyes than a whole race of African American people. What an insult! What an epitome of "The Mis-Education" of my people! This project is about my refusal to be a part of the problem and my conviction to live my life as part of the solution.

My experiences in higher education were in direct contrast to my experience in K-12. Until I entered undergraduate school, I never realized that people still judged people's intelligence on the color of their skin. I had been taught that this thinking was obsolete and that American culture had advanced to our proper space. I thought all people could learn and that education was an opportunity that was designed to help everyone achieve their goals. I never thought of myself as an idealist before that point in my life. The unfortunate truth is that when you hear something so much, you can start to believe it yourself- even when it contradicts 19 or 20 years of what has been ingrained in to your mind! Over the course of my pursuit of my Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D., I have had to constantly remind myself that I am supposed to reach my education goals and that I am not overstepping my bounds or trying to push myself in to a world where I do not belong. I have had many cheerleaders in this long process who have never wavered in their beliefs, and I have had to draw upon their strength to persevere, just as I was taught in K-12.

I wish I could say that the negative messages that I have received as an African American woman from a working class family and community were subtle and that I may have misunderstood or misread some of the messages, but I can't. I have received very obvious messages in the form of, undue or unwarranted criticism, withholding of information, verbal attacks, institutional and individual manipulation and other overt strategies have been used to deter me. While the strategies have been varied, the root has always been based in

some inerrant beliefs that African American people are inept and a discredit to the American dream. I am thankful that I know better and was taught better, and therefore try to teach others, including my own son and nieces and nephews, better.

My concern for my own Senegalese-American son who is being educated in today's American education system. He has had to face the mixed messages all too often in his elementary school career. At 11- years old, he has already confronted white racism and ridiculous beliefs about the African Americans and our ability to succeed academically. He has not been flattered by insinuations that he is smarter than the average African American boy because those insinuations are often followed by actions intended to bring him down to average and devalue the great potential he has. As his parent, I feel saddened for him because I faced this painful reality as an adult, when I was already pretty secure in who I was. The blessing is that he still receives messages from his family, supplemental education program staff and church that refute the gibberish, but the challenge is not over for him yet. As his parent, I feel an extreme pressure to impact the American education system to make it amenable for African American youth because it values us as individuals and as a culture of people. In fact, I feel a sense of urgency, like never before! I struggle daily to remind him to measure himself from the top, not the bottom like that do at his current suburban public school. I see him losing interest in academics because he spent his first 5 years of school in a private school where education was broader than a series of worksheets

printed of the internet- but included projects, experiments and other forms of experiential learning- strategies that kept him engaged and interested in learning, and did not leave him daydreaming in his head all day.

How it will be insightful to changing or thinking differently about the researchers own and other's practices

While my heart yet hurts, I will continue to seek to be a part of the solution for my son's sake, and for the sake of his peers. I see this inquiry as an important step in being true to my personal commitment, to ensure that proposed solutions are based on accurate assumptions of the problems and the challenges that must be overcome. I know that African American people are genetically wired to succeed in the face of the obstacles, primarily because as the enslaved people who had to fight for our freedom, including the right to learn and because science has yet to prove that there are biological differences in brains based on skin color. I also know that most research about African American people is conducted using quantitative methodologies based on very questionable sample sizes then deductions are made from these non-representative sample sizes to make sweeping statements about a group of people that then drives policies and practices- and even funding- that perpetuates the status quo!

In addition to this injustice- labels are placed on people and expectations are set and even whole new concentrations of study and

curriculum are developed to address these beliefs in the inadequacy of a whole group of people. Child development findings are no longer considered applicable to all children, and the area of classroom management has blown up- because somehow we have to “manage ‘those’ kids first, to then figure out if we can educate them”. The list of injustices goes on, as does the belief that African American people do not value education as a culture or a community. In fact, I was amazed to find that the beliefs have gone so far as to say we are socialized to not appreciate learning. I can’t stand by and watch silently, or I am part of the problem. In my quest for knowledge, I identified a whole body of research, often using qualitative methodologies that suggested strategies, pretty common-sense one’s to me, that could right some of this wrong thinking- the work’s of folks like Delpit, Woodson, Teel, Ladsen-Billings and others. These findings calmed my spirit and distressed me more, at the same time. My next line of questioning was then focused on wondering why this research rarely drives policy decisions, funding, practices and curriculum in teacher preparation programs or have success at refuting crazy national concepts- like that of the Black-White Achievement gap?

I believe that telling the stories of more African Americans who have managed to graduate in this crazy system of bias through the support of strong families and communities can help uplift the value of the work of many researchers who have come before me and are still working to have the proposed solutions driven by actual assessments of the challenges. Furthermore, this work will support the value of qualitative research in

advancing the voice of African American people in academic research. If this work identifies other solutions, it will also add value to the body of research over all and suggest new strategies that might have an even greater impact for African American students in schools today than what is perpetuated by current practice. I see this inquiry as the basis for my lifelong research, or at least a stepping stone to getting there and a huge step forward in moving towards my own life goals.